



MONASH University

# UNDERSTANDING AN INTUITIVE APPROACH TO ABSTRACT PAINTING

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# ABSTRACT

My studio practice undertaken during the period of my PhD candidature is given historical, conceptual and practical context through an exploration of the work of selected painters who have practised over the past century: Paul Klee, Willem de Kooning, Raoul De Keyser, Mary Heilmann, Tomma Abts and Emily Kngwarreye. I share with these artists an interest in the use colour, pattern, movement, the natural world and abstraction. The study of these artists provides a framework to investigate five key themes that arise when considering their practice: the poetic, doubt, the provisional, the performative and gesture. In this study I also refer to the critical and theoretical ideas related to these themes, in particular the writings of Clement Greenberg. I consider his emphasis on the flatness of the canvas, whether the work is abstract or representational, and his views on medium specificity. From this study I have found that abstract painting does not exhaust the possibilities of these themes but generates new prospects.

## DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.



Anna White

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# INTRODUCTION

*How can I understand my own intuitive approach within the context of the broader field of abstract painting?*

I have always been interested in the ability of colour and shape to convey ideas and emotions. In that sense even my very early artwork explored abstraction. I focused on plants and flowers, weather and pattern. After attending art school I painted landscapes and then still life arrangements of flowers. For many years I worked with flower imagery – focusing on pattern and individual flowers – which became more abstracted. I began using a type of mono-print technique in which I painted on glass and then transferred this paint onto canvas and paper. This practice led to the work becoming increasingly abstract and more about colour and the materiality of paint. My recent work continues to explore the same themes.

Thus the paintings completed during the period of my PhD candidature comprise an ongoing exploration of – and a sense of curiosity, wonder and excitement about – the outcomes of painting as a practice when colours and materials are manipulated and mixed. In the studio I have experimented and followed an intuitive approach. By an intuitive approach I mean one that follows instinctive decision making processes and an understanding of what I feel to be right without conscious reasoning. I try to be open to the unexpected and accidental, and I embrace the intangible nature of abstraction.

In this exegesis the studio practice undertaken during the period of my PhD candidature is given historical, conceptual and practical context through an exploration of selected painters who have practised over the past century. I look at the work of Paul Klee, Willem de Kooning, Raoul De Keyser, Mary Heilmann, Tomma Abts and Emily Kngwarreye. My selection of artists was determined by my attraction to their work, and researching them has also enriched my own project considerably. While each artist has been associated with a particular artistic movement, the practice of each is also highly individual. These artists are of particular interest because they use colour, pattern, geometry and abstraction while simultaneously questioning their own practice. Each individual artist's work does not follow a linear trajectory but appears to be exploratory. More specifically the study of these artists work provides a framework to investigate five key themes that arise when considering the practice of each of



them in terms of its making. These themes are: the poetic, doubt, the provisional, the performative and gesture.

Kirk Varnedoe has argued that abstract works of art in their quirkiness tend to resist generalities and reflect the vague confusions of individual experience as opposed to the authority of big ideas. In his 2003 essay, “Why Abstract Art?” he poses the questions ‘What is abstract art good for?’ ‘What is the use of paintings that do not seem to show anything except themselves?’ ‘Is there an underlying logic?’ Varnedoe’s response is: “there are no ‘hard’ reasons why abstract art has to be... It is a self-renewing, vital tradition of creativity.” Varnedoe acknowledges that abstraction does not reside solely in the intention of the artist, but must also be in the eye of the beholder and that there is difficulty in forcing the ‘abstractness’ of abstraction. He says that artists have worked hard to keep resemblance from their viewers; they understand that abstraction is most successful and effective when association and meaning appear to be out of reach. Most significantly he states “the absence of resemblance allows the work to embrace a great range of intuitions barely imaginable before the work was done, and only marginally present in the artist’s conscious intention.”<sup>1</sup> Varnedoe’s contentions resonate with me and support the notion of an intuitive approach to making abstract art that I explore in this exegesis.

This research leads me to question the nature of abstraction in painting and to explore the poetics of its making. I investigate and consider how thinking about abstraction has evolved over the past century. This research thus seeks to provide insights into the nature of abstract painting today. In so doing, I also make connections with my own work.

## CRITICAL CONTEXT

Abstract painting is commonly theorised through the post-World War II work of North American art critic Clement Greenberg (1909–1994). Greenberg was the most significant and influential critic of the 1940s and 1950s. In 1940, he joined *Partisan Review* as an editor. Greenberg became art critic for *The Nation* in 1942. He was associate editor of *Commentary* from 1945 until 1957.

In his first influential article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), Greenberg contended that Modernism is defined by self-criticality and a rethinking of mimesis: in the search

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, “Why Abstract Art?//2003,” in *Abstraction: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Lind (London, Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery, MIT Press, 2013). 59

for its irreducible identity, advanced painting asserts its essential uniqueness as a two dimensional, flat surface where the optical takes precedence over such traditional elements as subject and pictorial space. He also claimed that abstraction is more advanced than representational art.<sup>2</sup> In “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940), Greenberg further developed his ideas of the historical progress of painting.<sup>3</sup> He promoted the abstract artists of the emerging *New York School* as representative of a new avant-garde. For Greenberg this artwork represented a historical development extending on the projects of Cezanne and Picasso. The term first commonly used for this approach was ‘situational’. In his article “Abstract and Representational” (1954), Greenberg wrote:

Since the opaque surface of the modern, abstract or quasi-abstract picture blocked the spectator’s ‘escape’ into its pictorial space from his own space of ‘brute literalness’ in front of it, such a picture could deceive the eye of the spectator in only two ways; by optical rather than pictorial means, by relations of color, shape, and line largely divorced from descriptive connotations, and by ‘situations’ in which foreground and background, up and down, are interchangeable.<sup>4</sup>

Greenberg did not consider abstraction merely an artistic style but an actual medium itself. According to Greenberg, if a painting depicts some form of narrative content or figurative form, then it is impure by virtue of the fact that two mediums have been combined: painting and literature.<sup>5</sup> A canvas maintains its nature as a flat surface, and the paint maintains its nature by not representing anything other than paint.

Greenberg’s critical writings on abstract painting still have relevance today. For instance, in her 2004 essay, “Ut Pictura Poesis” Judith Harvey writes that in “Towards a Newer Laocoon” Greenberg changed the terms of the dialogue by investigating abstract art as a reaction to a confusion of the arts and how it might deal with that confusion. She quotes Greenberg: “There has been, is, and will be, such a thing as a confusion of the arts.”<sup>6</sup> Irish painter and writer Alan Gouk in his essay “Greenberg and Modernism” (2013) takes

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<sup>2</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).5-22

<sup>3</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).23-38

<sup>4</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Abstract and Representational,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). 191

<sup>5</sup> Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” 23-38

<sup>6</sup> Judith Harvey, “Ut Pictura Poesis”, University of Chicago <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/utpicturapoesis.htm> (accessed November 15 2014).

up another element of Greenberg's work when argues that the art Greenberg may have categorised as 'minor' is now viewed as important.<sup>7</sup> A connected argument has also been articulated by critic Raphael Rubinstein in his articles "Provisional Painting" (2009) and "To Rest Lightly on the Earth" (2012).

According to John Yau, the influence of Greenberg's formalist theory has been attractive to a younger generation of critics and art historians because "he seemed to be turning art history into a scientific method, with a variety of materially verifiable ways by which one could evaluate art. In doing so, he is claiming to be objective rather than subjective."<sup>8</sup> He argues that Greenberg's work thus heralded such developments as 'the death of painting,' 'de-skilling,' 'appropriation is the only game in town' and 'provisional painting' as manifestations of Greenberg's ideas of historical progress.<sup>9</sup> Comments such as those by Harvey, Gouk, Rubinstein and Yau confirm the ongoing legacy of Greenberg as a key critical reference point when thinking about the nature and development of abstract painting.

I consider Clement Greenberg's critical work in relation to the artists I have chosen to discuss. I take it up in different ways in each of the chapters. Paul Klee's painting *The Twittering Machine*, (1922) held in the Museum of Modern Art was Greenberg's first 'experience' of abstract art.<sup>10</sup> His 1950 "An Essay on Paul Klee" indicates a regard for the abstract qualities that Klee explored and Greenberg has cited him as an artistic predecessor to The American Abstract Expressionists.<sup>11</sup> As a contemporary and important figure during Willem de Kooning's period of ascendancy in the art world, Greenberg's influence at this time was significant. Artists who continue the practice of abstract painting today are still considered through Greenberg's critical lens. On the other hand, Emily Kngwarreye, whose painting conforms visually to the abstract painting Greenberg championed is interesting to consider because she comes from a completely different cultural context: her work appears to confound critique in this way.

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Gouk, "Greenberg and Modernism" <http://abstractcritical.com/article/greenberg-and-modernism/> (accessed September 29th, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> John Yau, "Some Thoughts on Clement Greenberg and His Legacy", Veken Gueyikian <https://hyperallergic.com/81514/some-thoughts-on-clement-greenberg-and-his-legacy/> (accessed 6 May 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Clement Greenberg, Russell Bingham, and Graham Peacock, "Edmonton Interview", Terry Fenton <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/interview.html> (accessed 18 June 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). 121-134 (first published in *Art International*, 25 October 1962)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

In the following four chapters I position each artist's practice in relation to particular critical influences that impacted upon them. I then look at formal aspects of their painting. I consider connections between the practices of these artists and my own. Considering ideas of the poetic, doubt, the provisional, the performative and gesture contributes to the understanding of an intuitive approach to abstract painting.

### The Poetic

In Chapter One I discuss the idea of the poetic, in the sense of poesis – the idea of making that emphasises process over product or content. I also examine it in relation to the Latin phrase 'ut picture poesis', coined by Horace in his *Ars Poetica*, to tentatively compare the art of painting with that of poetry – translated literally, 'as is painting, so is poetry.' I relate these concepts to the work of Paul Klee (1879 – 1940). His famous statement "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible"<sup>12</sup> may be interpreted as an endorsement of the fundamental notion that all art is abstract. It indicates the poetic / spiritual nature of his practice. I examine Klee's oeuvre in terms of rhythm, time, colour and nature. I look at Klee's painting in relation to his use of the grid, its relationship to music and to his overriding interest in movement.

### Doubt

The dynamic of painting, the motion that leaves traces on the canvas, which in Klee's paintings introduces the viewer to that space that underlies the spatiality of a thing, becomes the subject of painting for later artists. In Chapter Two I introduce the theme of 'doubt' and focus on Dutch-born American artist Willem de Kooning (1904–1997). De Kooning's work represents another type of abstraction – large scale as opposed to Klee's small and 'private'. While de Kooning acknowledged an instinctual type of practice such as Klee's, he also attempted to subvert his own instincts. De Kooning's painting, at times, conformed to the 'allover' composition that Greenberg championed. However he sought to constantly reinvent his work. Influenced by the Existential thinking of Jean Paul Sartre, de Kooning's practice is examined in terms of its slipperiness. The paintings slip between 'representational' and 'abstract.'

### The Provisional and Performative

The notion of doubt, linked to modernism is extended to examine the idea of 'the provisional' as argued by North American critic Raphael Rubinstein, who discusses

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Klee, *Creative Confession and Other Writings*, ed. Matthew Gale (London: Tate Publishing, 2013). 5

a tendency to spurn high craft and finish in favour of a more “makeshift, seemingly anti-market, esthetic”.<sup>13</sup> He cites work by contemporary artists, including the Belgian painter Raoul De Keyser (1930–2012) and the American, Mary Heilmann (b. 1940) as examples of artists who make work that looks casual, dashed off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling. I examine the work of these artists together with that of Tomma Abts, (b. 1967) whose work demonstrates a renewed interest in the possibilities and potentiality of abstract painting, using appropriation, recovery and repetition. Here I consider contemporary critical reappraisals of Clement Greenberg and the New York School legacy. I also extend the discussion of the ‘poetic’ to include the concept of the ‘performative’. Linked to the idea of the provisional, I consider their work as a form of ‘restaging’ – the high-modernist geometric painting and abstract expressionism of their predecessors is reinvented or forms a starting point for something new. I also look at the importance, for these artists of the installation of their paintings in the gallery which also has a performative aspect. Time, movement and music are revisited in relation to these artists.

### **Gesture**

Chapter Four discusses the paintings of Indigenous Australian artist Emily Kngwarreye (1910–1996). An examination of her painting provides an alternative perspective upon the question of what constitutes abstraction. On the one hand, Kngwarreye’s work appears to epitomise that of the ultimate modernist artist. On the other hand, it may be interpreted in cultural terms, and therefore for the artist is representational. I consider the work as a form of cross-cultural communication, contemporary art that is the result of a desire by the artist to convey the power of her cultural knowledge to a broader western audience. I examine Kngwarreye’s practice in terms of ‘gesture’. The dynamic visual manifestation in these paintings may be contributed to by the transformational qualities of the Altyerr (Dreaming stories) known by the artist. Kngwarreye’s paintings also constitute an alternative perspective from which to examine the themes of the poetic, doubt, the provisional and performative. I look at Kngwarreye’s use of materials and methods and the trajectory of her work.

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<sup>13</sup> Raphael Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” *Art in America* 97, no. 5 (2009). 123

## CHAPTER ONE: The Poetic

My research explores the question of what it means to ‘make visible’. If Paul Klee’s (1879–1940) often quoted statement “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible,”<sup>14</sup> indicates the poetic or spiritual nature of his practice, it can also be interpreted as an endorsement of the fundamental notion that all art is abstract. This connection between abstraction and the term poetic or *poesis* will be examined in this chapter. As mentioned in the introduction, the connection between poetry and painting, highlighted in the phrase ‘ut pictura poesis’, ‘as is painting, so is poetry’, is an important element in the development of theories of abstraction. A key question raised by Klee’s notion of art as ‘making visible’ is how to understand art that is not ‘representation’ or mimesis. For me the question of ‘making’ is central to how I understand my own practice and Klee provides a way to understand the complexity of making beyond representation.

First I will look at Klee in the context of the thought of his times, as his practice was grounded in philosophical, spiritual and conceptual notions of art and life. I will then investigate particular aspects of Klee’s working methodologies: his use of materials and ways of working; and how the influences on Klee were both represented in his practice and influenced the artistic outcome. In focusing upon Klee’s use of formal elements, such as the grid, pattern, geometric shapes, and colour, I examine the relationship of the work to music and rhythm and to Klee’s overriding interest in movement. Finally, I will discuss my own artwork in the context of these ideas.

Klee grew up in Bern, Switzerland as a German national in a musical household; his father a music teacher and mother a singer. In 1898 he began studying painting and drawing at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich for three years. Subsequent to this from 1903–10, he worked in relative isolation. In 1911, he joined the editorial team of the journal *Der Blaue Reiter*, and developed close connections with the artists Franz Marc, Wassily Kandinsky and Auguste Macke. During a trip to Tunisia in 1914 Klee began to perceive the abstract potential of colour and from then on did not paint from life. Klee participated in and was influenced by a range of artistic movements, including surrealism, cubism and expressionism. During World War I, when conscripted into the German air force as photographer he received his first commercial success through an exhibition at *Der Sturm* gallery, Berlin, in 1917. As a lecturer

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<sup>14</sup> Klee. 5

from 1921 to 1931 at the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius' school of art and design in Weimar, and then in Dessau, Germany, Klee was at the centre of contemporary European ideas surrounding abstraction. During this period he produced nearly half of his 10,000 works (mainly small-scale watercolours and drawings on paper). Klee read widely and wrote on art theory and aesthetics as part of his job as lecturer at the Bauhaus. From 1931–1933, he taught at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf. In 1933 his art was declared 'degenerate' by the National Socialists and he returned to Bern. Klee's pedagogical sketchbook was published in 1924. Later his notes were edited by Jürg Spiller and published in 1956 and 1964.

## SECTION I: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Poesis & The poetic

My interest in the idea of *poesis* in relation to visual art is connected to the original meaning of the word, from the ancient Greek *poiēsis*, meaning 'to make', 'creation', an action that transforms and continues the world. In this sense it raises the idea of making art over that of art as representation. In using the term 'poetic' in this exegesis I refer to it specifically in relation to visual art. In poetry, words are used in a manner that differentiates them from ordinary prose. Language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content. In this way the association of visual elements in a work that is exploratory, organic and open ended signifies the poetic for me. The poetic is the interactive layering and combining of elements in original and refreshing ways to generate meaning.

The famous final line from Archibald MacLeish's 1926 poem "a poem should not mean but be"<sup>15</sup> quoted by Ezra Pound and subsequently seen as a kind of encapsulation of what modernist poetry (and art more generally) has been about, could serve as a reference point. One interpretation of this line is to say that the emotional resonance of a poem or painting can't be simply reduced to what it is 'about' or to a message. It can also be understood to suggest that the work of art expresses but does not have a statement that is clear and unambiguous – uncertainty is part of its essence. This is not to say that representative art is reducible to 'meanings' in any simple way or that the question of uncertainty is not important for all painting, but that the more 'abstract' work such as Klee's later painting seems to highlight uncertainty as a condition of possibility for painting.

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<sup>15</sup> Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica", Poetry Magazine <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/6371> (accessed 5 July 2015).

This idea is echoed in French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre 1947 text, “What is Literature?” in which he states that the poet is like the painter in that both make objects; the poet conceives of words as things and joins them as a painter does his pigments. According to Sartre, with visual art’s departure from narrative, sequential form and ‘representation’ in the twentieth century, it could finally approximate the structure and effects of poetry. As he argued: “A distinction must be made: the realm of signs is prose, poetry is on the side of painting, sculpture, and music.”<sup>16</sup>

Derek H. Whitehead, in the journal *Contemporary Aesthetics*, raises the question of what might be the relation between *poesis* and the sensory embodiments of art making.<sup>17</sup> Whitehead suggests that “[...] *poesis* – that which produces or leads (a thing) into being – may enable practitioners in the varying art forms, and aestheticians who reflect upon them, to come to a deeper sense of how artworks work: that they realize themselves inter-dependently of the formative conditions of their inception.”<sup>18</sup> Whitehead also makes a connection to Martin Heidegger’s use of the term in its widest sense – as a ‘bringing forth’. Heidegger explained *poesis* as the flowering of the blossom, or coming-out of a butterfly from a cocoon.<sup>19</sup>

### Klee’s Connection to Philosophy

Klee believed visual art practice was the most effective means for him to grapple with philosophical ideas, suggesting that, “The artist is without wanting to be a philosopher”.<sup>20</sup> He implies that his art is manifesting philosophical ideas unwittingly or unintentionally. If the work of art is compelled to reproduce nature, what is produced is precisely the unrepresentable. According to Klee, nature can only show itself symbolically, as something “poetic and not literary... as though a certain diffidence stopped it from putting things the way they are.”<sup>21</sup> This is a strong argument for the continuance of abstract art, as well as for its metaphysical connections.

Paul Klee was connected to many leading thinkers of his time, including writers and philosophers. These connections often involved personal friendships, as well as shared ideas

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<sup>16</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre and Bernard Frechtman, *What Is Literature?* (London: Routledge, 2001). 5

<sup>17</sup> Derek H. Whitehead, “Poiesis and Art-Making: A Way of Letting-Be”, Michigan Publishing <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=216> (accessed 24 July 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (London and Toronto: Harper and Row, Perennial Library, 1975). 17

<sup>20</sup> Paul Klee, “On Modern Art,” in *Paul Klee: Philosophical Vision, from Nature to Art*, ed. John Sallis (Boston: McMullen Museum of Art, 2012). 13

<sup>21</sup> Paul Klee and Jürg Spiller, *Paul Klee: The Thinking Eye* (London: Lund Humphries, 1961). Vol 1,430



and influences. Klee and the Bohemian- Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), had a similar interest in the transformational power of nature. Both artists were interested in the symbol of the angel, invoking the Greek figure of Orpheus (the poet and musician) in their respective practices, reflecting the importance of a connection between visual art, poetry and music. Judith Bernstock makes the point: “Klee and Rilke shared the opinion that one’s position is a rhythmic exchange between the self and the world-space”.<sup>22</sup> For both, she adds, “art parallels creation; they believed that art must arise from a descent into the depths, from a relinquishing of the material world and an attainment of the invisible and spiritual, the world of eternal relations in nature.”<sup>23</sup>

French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) took up Klee’s work. Merleau-Ponty, in his essay *Eye and Mind*, sought to develop an ontological conception of painting in which Klee figures as the prototypical modern painter. Merleau-Ponty declared that “painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility.”<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty also made the point that painting celebrates visibility by giving “visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible.”<sup>25</sup> John Sallis in *Paul Klee: Philosophical Vision, From Nature to Art* makes the point that, “in celebrating visibility, however, painting celebrates it precisely as enigmatic, that is, as implicated in moments or aspects that ordinary vision regards as invisible.”<sup>26</sup>

## Modernism

Modernism in art has its roots in the 19th century, when artists began to make art based on their own experiences. A common thread was a break with tradition, epitomised by the poet Ezra Pound’s 1934 injunction to ‘make it new’.<sup>27</sup> Early Modernism is typified by a general commitment to exploratory experimentation. It also elevates challenge, critical autonomy and creative innovation. In visual art it is associated with abstraction. The year 1913 is now viewed by some as the point when Modernist abstract art emerged, appearing almost simultaneously in various European countries. As an artist of his time, Klee’s work

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<sup>22</sup> Judith E. Bernstock, *Under the Spell of Orpheus: The Persistence of a Myth in Twentieth-Century Art* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).29

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 29

<sup>24</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993).127 (written in 1960, first published 1961 as an essay in *Art de France*.)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.127

<sup>26</sup> John Sallis, “Klee’s Philosophical Vision,” in *Paul Klee Philosophical Vision: From Nature to Art* ed. John Sallis (Boston: McMullen Museum of Art, 2012). 22

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Palmer, “Expainer: What Is Postmodernism?” <https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-is-postmodernism-20791> (accessed 24 July 2014).

displays Modernist characteristics of doubt and uncertainty. One aspect of this is his use of the accidental in his work. Klee declared in *Creative Confession*, that art must capture “the essential quality of the accidental.”<sup>28</sup> Another is the increasing abstraction of the work, and the inspiration of the art of children and non-Western traditions of art. He elaborated on this idea by arguing that art should be nothing less than potentiality, raw and vital, an earthly approximation of cosmic creation.<sup>29</sup> Alana Schilling-Janoff states, in a review of Klee’s 2013 Tate Modern retrospective exhibition, that Klee’s works can best be understood as a “suspension of readability, a visual proclamation of modernity’s hermeneutic impasse, a stripping of all fact that leaves only the naked perhaps”.<sup>30</sup> Schilling-Janoff’s point reflects my own view that Klee’s artworks defy interpretation, and hint at multiple viewpoints, reflecting the idea of doubt and uncertainty that I am tracing in this exegesis.

### Greenberg’s Perspective on Klee

In a 1961 interview Greenberg stated that Klee’s painting *The Twittering Machine*, 1922 held in the Museum of Modern Art was his first ‘experience’ of art.<sup>31</sup> In his essay “After Abstract Expressionism” Greenberg described the work of Picasso, Leger, Braque, Klee and Miro as ‘schematic representation’ and therefore virtually abstract.<sup>32</sup> It was from these European Modernists, along with Mondrian, that the New York School artists who Greenberg championed, got their most important lessons in abstraction.<sup>33</sup> He wrote that representational art confronted the ambition of the New York School artists because it presented too many occupied positions. That it was not so much representation per se that cramped them as it was illusion.<sup>34</sup> He also asserted that the primary value of Klee’s art (be it abstract or figurative) lay in its abstract qualities. Klee was influenced by the Synthetic Cubism of Picasso and Braque, which Greenberg also cites as inseparable from serious abstract art, “which meant cleanly marked contours, closed and more or less regular shapes, and flat color.”<sup>35</sup> Greenberg observed that, in Klee’s art: “it is not that nature is not imitated faithfully enough but that nature and the external world are assigned a different role than formerly.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Klee, *Creative Confession and Other Writings*. 10

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 10-11

<sup>30</sup> Alana Schilling-Janoff, “Paul Klee and the Naked Perhaps: Making Visible” <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2014/02/artseen/paul-klee-and-the-naked-perhaps-making-visible> (accessed 20 July 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Clement Greenberg, Russell Bingham, and Graham Peacock, “Edmonton Interview”, Terry Fenton <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/interview.html> (accessed 18 June 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Clement Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). 121

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 121

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.121

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.121

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 121

## SECTION II: NATURE, MOVEMENT, RHYTHM & GRID

### Interest in Nature

In the following section I will investigate the importance of the natural world, for the development of Klee's poetic engagement with his art practice. As art historian Rosalind Krauss has noted, a rift had opened between the sacred and the secular, in the de-sacralized space of the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Klee's philosophical ideas form the basis of a strong spiritual or metaphysical dimension in the way he approached his work, as if there were a divine voice that inspired him. In his artistic production, as well as in his classes at the Bauhaus, the processes of growth and the structures in nature served as his point of departure. The study of nature led Klee to make use of its regular patterns, reproduction and growth, as a foundation for his own artistic methods. In his pedagogical notebooks Klee formulated a set of precise diagrams and notes that could serve as a theoretical foundation.<sup>38</sup> In lectures titled 'Theory of Pictorial Form' and 'Pictorial Mechanics', Klee encouraged students to create in a manner that was alive like nature itself.<sup>39</sup> Klee used a process of simplification: "Reduction! We wish to say more than nature does, yet commit the error of impossibly wishing to say it with more means than nature has at her disposal, instead of with fewer"<sup>40</sup>

In a lecture given on the occasion of an exhibition in Jena in 1924, Klee used the simile of a tree to describe the artistic process – an artist has put down roots which serve to nourish him. Klee said:

The artist takes the place of the trunk. He mediates and conducts that which comes forth. The crown does not mirror the root system, and the beauty of the crown is not he himself, but what has passed through him. Nothing should be done headlong. It has to grow, has to mature, and if someday the time is ripe for such a work, so much the better.<sup>41</sup>

Klee believed that during the period in which a work receives its shape the creative process goes on more or less pre-consciously. Just as there is not symmetry between roots and leaves and the path of growth cannot be predicted. In his thinking, the journey is the most important part of the artistic process.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986). 12 originally published in *October* 9, no. 9 (1979)

<sup>38</sup> Paul Klee and Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968).

<sup>39</sup> Fabienne Eggelhöfer, "Nature," in *Paul Klee: Bauhaus Master* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2013). 173

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 173

<sup>41</sup> Klee, "On Modern Art." 10 (First published in 1945).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 14

Paul Klee's painting *Ripening Growth*, 1921, 71, (Figure 1) is one of many examples demonstrating Klee's use of allusion to the natural world; the title points strongly to this inspiration. The image is made up of repeated geometric shapes – largely circles, triangles and diamonds. With a limited colour palette consisting of tonal variations of pink – graduating from pale pink to a warm grey, Klee has built a dynamic, composition that alludes to a forest or garden of plants; this has the appearance of an organism growing and multiplying but it is made up of completely abstract elements.

### **Movement**

As mentioned above, Klee's key interest was in movement which also related to his views on rhythm and nature. Ultimately these notions connect with the overriding one of 'making visible'; the process of making, and the poetic. The work is something yet to happen, something always becoming, or, to use Klee's term, genesis.<sup>43</sup> In Klee's words, "the artwork is movement, it is itself a fixed movement, and is perceived in movement (the eye-muscles)."<sup>44</sup> Klee's discussion of movement is recurring, whether related to the making, reception or the theoretical discussion of it. Movement is evident in his artwork which is imbued with a dynamic quality.

The principle of movement dominated Klee's pedagogical notes, in which he used multiple metaphors and symbols attributed to line. These include stains, blurred strokes, smooth, striated and blurred surfaces. The types of movement alluded to are also various – undulating movement, inhibited movement, articulated counter movement, braiding, weaving, masonry, imbrication, solo, multiple voices, disappearing lines in the process of being reactivated (dynamism). Examining Klee's work one may observe figures and motifs built up and creating a precarious sense of balance across the picture plane.

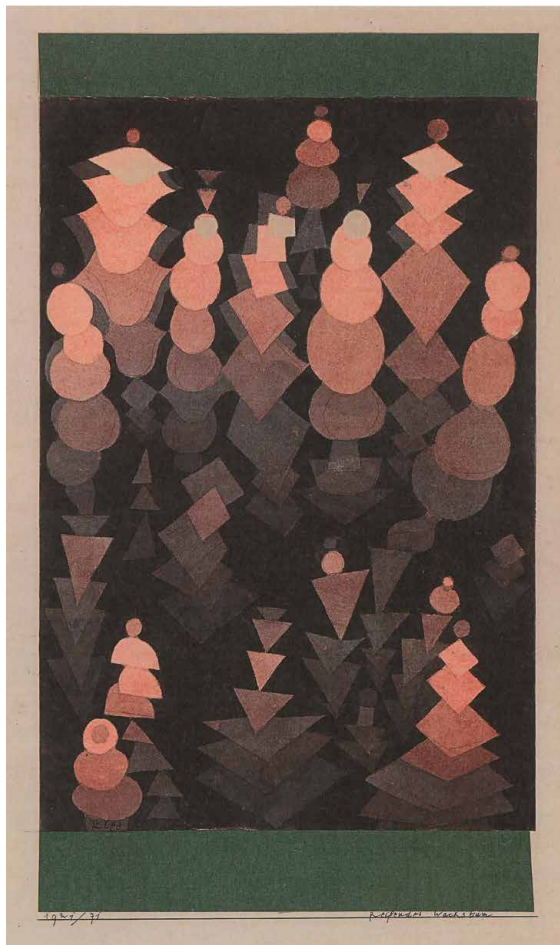
*Creative Confession* contains a long passage pertaining to movement.

The pendulum represents movement in space and time, it symbolizes the mediation between gravity and momentum, between rest and movement. Of the spiral: It is the direction that decides whether we are being released from the centre in a movement that is ever freer or whether we are becoming more and more attached to a centre that will ultimately destroy us: the question means nothing less than life and death. The first act of movement (line) takes us far beyond the dead point. After a short while we stop to get our breath (interrupted line or, if we stop several times, an articulated line). And now

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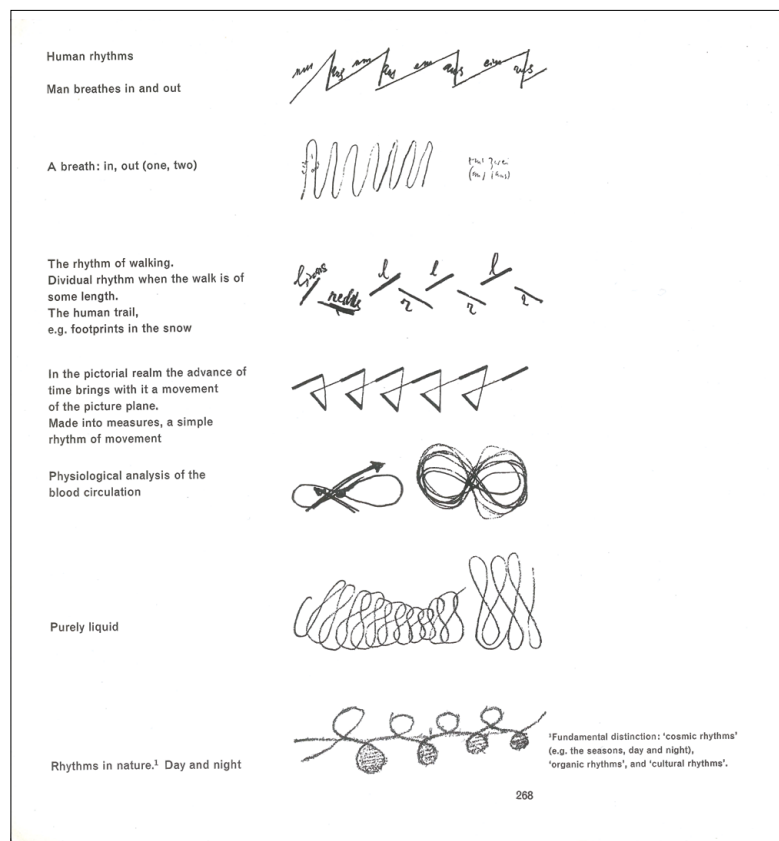
<sup>43</sup> Klee, *Creative Confession and Other Writings*. 9

<sup>44</sup> Otto Werckmeister, *The Making of Paul Klee's Career, 1914–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). 133



**Figure 1,** Paul Klee, *Ripening Growth*  
1921,71, (detail) Watercolour and  
graphite on paper on cardboard,  
of 41.9 x 23.8 cm

**Figure 2,** Paul Klee,  
*Nature-Human Rhythms*,  
page from notebook, in  
Jürg Spiller, *Paul Klee: The  
Thinking Eye*, (London: Lund  
Humphries, 1961) 268



a glance back to see how far we have come (counter-movement). We consider the road in this direction or in another direction (bundles of lines). A river is in the way, we use a boat (wavy motion). Farther upstream we should have found a bridge (series of arches).<sup>45</sup>

These notes demonstrate the importance Klee places on to the formative forces over the end forms. As John Sallis has pointed out, the shift from form to forming or form giving, is movement and action.<sup>46</sup>

Pages from Klee's teaching notes demonstrate the attributes ascribed to repeated linear pattern. Human rhythms (Figure 2), is one of many line drawings outlining Klee's perception of particular modes of movement. Illustrated here is the movement of breath, of walking, physiological analysis of the blood circulation, and day and night.<sup>47</sup>

### Rhythm

Klee's emphasis on movement can be linked to his involvement with music. He was a practising violinist throughout his life, and gave occasional performances. This experience and knowledge of music and music theory was applied to his art. Klee wrote about a 'plastic polyphony', and used this term as a title for paintings.<sup>48</sup> In music, polyphony is a texture consisting of two or more simultaneous lines of independent melody such as used by the composer Bach. Transferring this notion to the visual arts indicates Klee's sense of a connectedness between the art forms. For Klee, pictorial space was 'energy', a process: a space of stretchings, slidings, straddlings. This idea indicates his interest in rhythm, melody, movement and time. A painting becomes an organisation of multiplicity in a unity. Pictorial 'composition', is to hold together construction and phenomenon, it is itself a combination of rigid and unbounded rhythms and forms that Klee calls a 'superior polyphony'.<sup>49</sup>

### Grid

The grid recurs throughout Klee's work and is another iteration of his ideas about movement and rhythm as well as a reflection of his Modernism. Krauss, in her essay 'Grids', wrote that the grid is a significant common point for much modernist art, it "... allows a contradiction between the values of science and those of spiritualism to maintain

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<sup>45</sup> Klee, *Creative Confession and Other Writings*. 5-6

<sup>46</sup> Sallis. 15-16

<sup>47</sup> Klee and Spiller. 268

<sup>48</sup> Klee, *Creative Confession and Other Writings*. 11

<sup>49</sup> Eliane Escoubas, "A Polyphonic Painting: Paul Klee and Rhythm," in *Paul Klee: Philosophical Vision, from Nature to Art*, ed. John Sallis (Boston: McMullen Museum of Art, 2012).136

themselves within the consciousness of modernism, or rather its unconscious, as something repressed.”<sup>50</sup> Following a trip to Tunisia, with the artists Auguste Macke and Louis Moilliet, Klee produced his first abstract painting, *In the Style of Kairouan* (1914), composed of coloured rectangles and a few circles.<sup>51</sup> The coloured rectangle became his basic building block that commentators associate with a musical note. Klee combined coloured blocks to create a colour harmony analogous to a musical composition. Sometimes he used complementary pairs of colours, and other times ‘dissonant’ ones. Klee varied the size of the squares, the regularity of the grid, and the translucency of the veil. The cubist grid remained a ‘matrix’ for Klee, according to T. J. Clark, who makes the point that, in and around 1923, Klee found a way to make even the tight cubist grid do the work he wanted – by inserting enough brighter and lighter squares into the checkerboard composition, each of them “beckoning the eye through the foreground into depth, so that the surface came to look as if it were a kind of transparency ‘really’ hung across a glimpsed infinity on the other side.”<sup>52</sup>

Klee’s grid paintings exemplify the combination of ideas on making, movement and rhythm. One instance, *Tempo of Three, Quartered*, 1930, (Figure 3) consists of an organic looking grid of muted colours. Appearing hand drawn, and irregular, it is a roughhewn matrix of squares framed by a brownish border. The squares are black, bluish grey and white. It appears that the pigments were mixed upon the surface of the picture. The tonal and colour variation in the quadrants, as well as between them, create a dynamic reading of the painting.

Comparisons have been made between Klee’s linear and gridded compositions and a keyboard, by Judith Bernstock, amongst others.<sup>53</sup> Stripes represent a rhythm based on particular numerical intervals. Referring to Klee’s works of 1928 and 1929, completed after a trip to Egypt, Bernstock suggests that these images beat out a rhythm – the whole illustrating ‘unambiguous movement and countermovement’.<sup>54</sup> Craig Raine contends that, for Klee, a grid can be almost anything.

Waves, ripples, a grid like a musical stave. Horticulture – a vegetable garden – becomes another natural grid, alternating peas and carrots and cabbages. His abstracts

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<sup>50</sup> Krauss., 13.

<sup>51</sup> Susanna Partsch, *Paul Klee, 1879-1940* (Cologne: Taschen, 1993). 27

<sup>52</sup> T.J. Clark, “At Tate Modern” <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n01/tj-clark/at-tate-modern> (accessed 26 July 2014).

<sup>53</sup> Bernstock 30

<sup>54</sup> Bernstock. 30



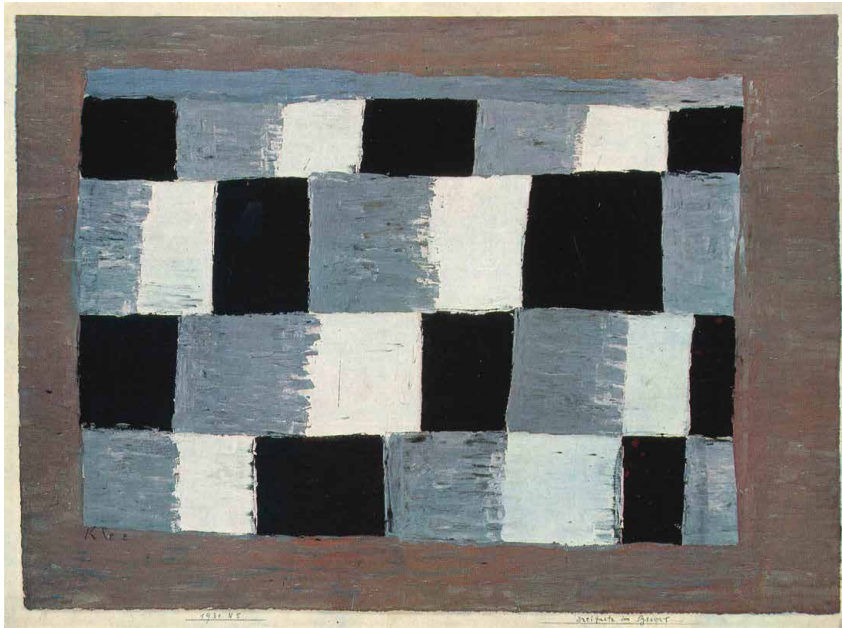


Figure 3, Paul Klee, *Tempo of Three, Quartered*, 1930, paste colours, cut paper and cardboard, 44.5 x 61.2 cm.

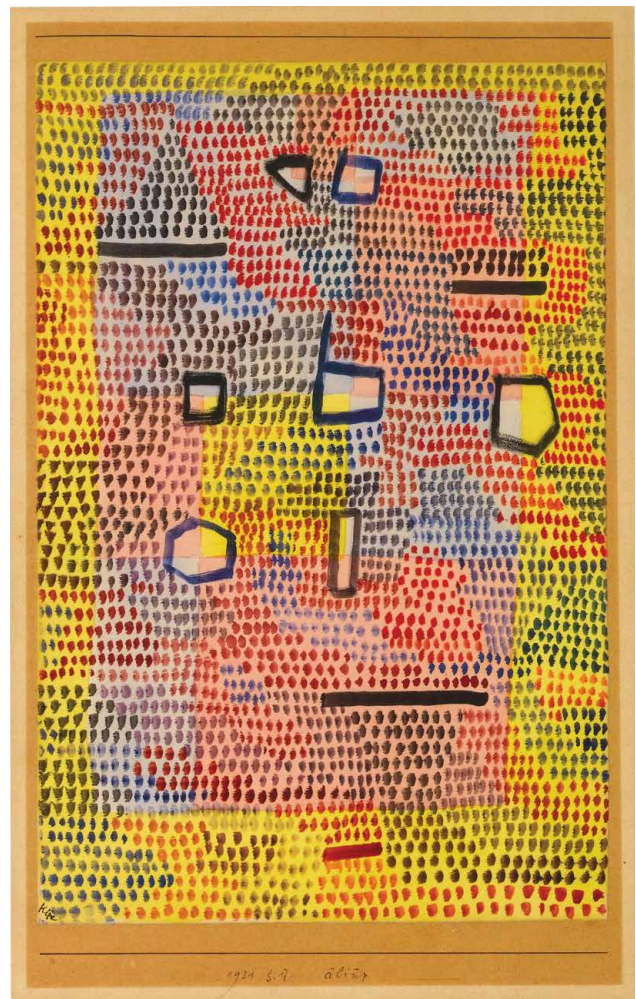


Figure 4, Paul Klee, *Äliup*, 1931/177, watercolour and pencil on paper on cardboard, 47.9 x 31.4 cm



come together like quilts, or fit together like flooring, like parquet, or a great wall of liquorice allsorts, sweet with delicious colours. Then there is the mosaic's mini-brick as a model and inspiration, the isolated mark of the brush, touched into existence rather than stroked into being – and then the morph into pointillism.<sup>55</sup>

Klee's paintings of 1931 and 1932 take the grid structure to another level, where coloured lines and shapes are overlaid with stippled dots or tiles. These paintings have a shimmering quality, in which the grid forms a patchwork hovering across the surface of the picture plane. One such work is *Äliup*, 1931, (Figure 4) has an oscillating, rhythmic appearance, and the grid structure has become multi-faceted. It is one of a group of works Klee completed around this time using what has been termed a pointillist technique. Small blocks of shifting colour, like tessellated tiles appear to shimmer and float through the background. In this work the layering, with the yellow square showing through the centre of the painting, lines and small outlined geometric shapes that punctuate the tessellations, revealing a checked field below represents a highpoint in his work for me. The red, yellow and blue palette creates the sense of undulation with variation in the spacing and intensity of pigment and size of the brushstrokes.

### SECTION III: METHOD AND MATERIALS

#### Materials

The ways in which Klee used materials to develop his artwork are significant to my project. I became aware of Klee's work when I attended art school, through books, and have revisited it while undertaking this research. On a visit to the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York in 2012 I viewed the painting *Pastorale (Rhythms)*, 1927. The layers and texture of this small-scale work, experienced in person, had a powerful resonance. This painting in tempera on canvas mounted on wood has a handmade appearance. The linear format has the effect of an engraved tablet, but also has a 'horizon'.

Much of Klee's art work was produced on paper or cardboard supports. His use of watercolour and paper throughout his career was perhaps related to German printmaking and watercolour traditions. However, Klee's art practice encompassed a diverse experimentation with materials, to create unusual qualities of texture and colour. He experimented with collage, photomontage, assemblage and frottage.<sup>56</sup> Klee worked in many different media, including

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<sup>55</sup> Craig Raine, "The Machinery and Magic of Paul Klee's Paintings – in Close Up," *New Statesman* 17, no. 57 (2013).

<sup>56</sup> Partsch. 62

oil paint, ink, pastel, etching, chalk, and gesso. These were often combined into one work, for example, oil with watercolour, watercolour with pen and India ink, and oil with tempera, employing spray paint, knife application, stamping, glazing, and impasto.<sup>57</sup> With a technique resembling the mono print, that he called the 'oil transfer' process, Klee traced a drawing onto paper backed with ink or oil paint and then transferred this impression onto another surface. The line is transformed as it is transferred, becoming slightly blurred and ragged. The technique meant that the under-drawing is dirtied in places; the drawings look 'found' and primitive rather than composed. *Angelus Novus*, 1920, which served as Walter Benjamin's visual allegory for his 'Angel of History', in the 1940 essay *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, is an example of Klee's use of this technical process.

### Drawing and Colour

Drawing dominated Klee's early work. Through experimentation and the influence of peers, he developed his use of colour and tonality. On a trip to Tunisia in 1914 he wrote that the use of colour was 'revealed to him'.

Colour possesses me. I have no need to chase after it. It has me forever. I know that to be true. It is the sense of the hour of gladness: I and colour are one. I am a painter.<sup>58</sup>

Klee used a great variety of colour palettes from nearly monochromatic to highly polychromatic. Many works combined both drawing and painting. He often used geometric forms as well as letters, numbers, and arrows, and combined them with figures, animals and people. Many of his works and their titles reflect a dry humour and varying moods; some express political convictions. They frequently allude to poetry, music and dreams and sometimes include words or musical notation. The later works are distinguished by spidery hieroglyph-like symbols. T. J. Clark wrote of a late painting *Forest Witches (Wald-Hexen)* from 1938, "The balance he spent a lifetime looking for, in his colour and touch, between eerie fragility and just enough decisiveness – insect lightness contending with a half-self-mocking monumentality – was never struck better."<sup>59</sup>

### Scale

Use of paper and cardboard support, and the generally small dimensions of Klee's work may have liberated him to improvise and expand his ideas quickly and freely. Greenberg stated that Klee's greatest audacity was his modesty:

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 58–60

<sup>58</sup> Marianne Keller Tschirren, "Color," in *Paul Klee: Bauhaus Master* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2013). 147

<sup>59</sup> Clark.

Because it is small, the picture demands close scrutiny, confining visual attention to a compass within which the eye can travel with least effort through intricate complications of detail. Yet the eye does not make an instantaneous synthesis; with Klee design is as it were, temporal or musical.<sup>60</sup>

Greenberg compares Klee to Picasso who was an early and significant influence upon Klee, saying that Picasso sees a picture as a wall, while Klee sees it as a page.<sup>61</sup>

Klee's often quoted phrases "A line is a dot that went for a walk" and "A drawing is simply a line going for a walk" are derived from Klee's notes and relate to his ideas about movement.<sup>62</sup> He wrote "The point sets itself in motion and an essential structure grows..."<sup>63</sup> For Klee, the line is moving movement. As Richard Dormont puts it: "Klee started every picture with an abstract mark – a square, a triangle, a circle, a line or a dot – and then allowed that motif to evolve or grow, almost like a living organism. One has the sense that he began the drawing not knowing where it would lead."<sup>64</sup> One picture led to another.<sup>65</sup>

## SECTION IV: CONNECTIONS TO MY PRACTICE

I was drawn to the poetic quality of Klee's work when studying painting at art school. The references to the natural world, the magical colour and abstraction of the grids in his work resonated with me. On embarking on this PhD research I noted a strong connection between the contemporary artists whose painting I was considering with and Klee's work, which I had disregarded in the intervening years. In conducting this research I have again been inspired by formal aspects of Klee's practice. Here I examine some of the points of intersection with my own work.

The basic lines and geometric shapes that form building blocks for Klee also form the basis for some of my paintings. Squares, circles and lines are used. In *Sunset Painting*, (Figure 34),

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<sup>60</sup> Greenberg, "An Essay on Paul Klee." 7

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>62</sup> Paul Klee, "The Biography.Com Website", A&E Television Network <http://www.biography.com/people/paul-klee-9366304> (accessed May 12 2015).

<sup>63</sup> Klee and Spiller. 21

<sup>64</sup> Richard Dormont, "Paul Klee: Making Visible, Tate Modern, Review," *The Telegraph*, no. October 14 (2013). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10377689/Paul-Klee-Making-Visible-Tate-Modern-review.html> (accessed February 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Boris Friedewald, *Paul Klee: Life and Work* (Munich: Prestel, 2011). 166

and *Night Painting* (Figure 35), both from 2010, circles are the dominant shape. In these particular works the process was more extended than in some others as I printed the circles, applying dots of paint to acrylic sheet. I then squashed the paint onto another sheet, to create a printed, dendritic effect. I repeated this several times building up layers of circular shapes and then scraping the surface of the paint with an acrylic scraper. This process created a misty atmosphere which inspired the titles, in reference to varying light and atmospheric

In commencing my work, my practice is to make a mark on the painting support, which will suggest a way in which to proceed with the painting. I explore lines that cross over one another, or follow the contour of the other. I begin working in the same way as has been described of Klee. I work small scale, intuitively, using building blocks of simple line and geometric shapes in combination with a limited colour palette. Paintings such as *Chinese Whispers* 2013 (Figure 78), for example was started with a painted line. I then followed the contour of this line with a line in another colour and so on until the support was filled. As in the game Chinese Whispers, where a word phrase changes when being passed from one person to another, the contour of this line morphs.

Movement is indicated by the scraping activity in my work. I scrape across the paint that I have applied to the support and this process of movement is evident in the finished work. As discussed above in relation to Klee, it is part of a forming, growing, process. The scraping of the paint is a transformational practice. The initial lines are transformed from their placement on the surface by the blending and moving of pigment that occurs when it is scraped. This procedure applies overall to the body of my work with differing effects.

I use an irregular grid intuitively. It is a starting point from which to diverge. A grid morphs into an organic shape or contour. In the painting *Dial*, 2013 (Figure 74) I have used circles and a rectangle on a white ground. Shapes are placed in a linear composition. The same applies to *Green Geo* 2013 (Figure 73) in which I commenced with a triangular shape outlined in white paint, followed by other shapes in alternate colours and forms. I wanted to introduce a sense of rhythm to the painting as I worked on it.

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Klee's work is a searching for a sense of logic in the chaos of the world he experienced. It is not explicit, and is open to interpretation. Klee's notions of doubt and incompleteness

are evident in his work. There are indications of this in his references to the natural world, the fragility of his work and the constant reference to movement. In researching Klee's practice I became more aware of connections with my own work. Looking at Klee's oeuvre in terms of abstraction and *poesis* forms an important touchstone for the ensuing chapters. His practice of reinterpreting basic elements is echoed in the work of the artists in the following chapters. The notion of doubt that preoccupied artists of the following generation will be examined in Chapter Two in relation to the work of Willem de Kooning.

## CHAPTER TWO: Doubt

In this chapter I will further explore the development of abstract painting in the twentieth century. In the previous chapter I discussed the elements of uncertainty and doubt that can accompany abstract art in relation to the open-endedness and invention apparent in the practice of Paul Klee. In this chapter I will explore the practice of renewal and discovery, transformation and change in connection to aspects of the oeuvre of the Dutch-born artist Willem de Kooning (1904–1997). De Kooning's work exemplifies the themes of invention, freedom and risk. He is also of interest to my project because of the ways in which he made 'painting' itself the subject of his work, thus raising questions about what 'Art' is. De Kooning expressed a desire to create a sense of ease and spontaneity in his work. His interest in capturing fleeting and transient moments and impressions, based on the environments in which he lived and worked, may also be connected to notions of doubt and uncertainty. De Kooning's doubt did not prevent him from working but spurred him on to explore, experiment, and continuously develop his oeuvre. I will analyse his statements and the strategies he employed to achieve his aims by examining his use of materials, aspects of the trajectory of his work and individual paintings.

In titling this chapter 'Doubt' I refer not to any doubt of de Kooning personally, but to a more overriding concept of doubt inherent in the Modernist questioning of received traditions, and the ways that this artist grappled with it in his work. In spite of de Kooning's disregard for convention and the habitual subversion of expectations that informed his practice, he and his peers extended upon the Modernist project of their European forbears such as Klee and Picasso. He was an artist deeply engaged with contemporary ideas, socialising with writers, critics and other artists in New York. I will look at some of these influences, including philosophers and writers de Kooning was known to have read, such as Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It is also pertinent to discuss de Kooning in relation to the critic Clement Greenberg who was his contemporary, and as already noted, a key figure in establishing theoretical perspectives on abstraction. I will discuss the intellectual environment in which de Kooning was immersed before discussing his studio painting practice, which is the primary interest of my project.

Willem de Kooning emigrated to the United States of America from the Netherlands in 1926. He was one of the most knowledgeable artists of his generation about paints,

bringing to his craft a rigorous European training. In the Netherlands he was apprenticed to a commercial design and decorating firm, and attended the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts and Techniques.<sup>66</sup> In the USA, he supported himself in his early years as a house painter and with a variety of commercial art jobs.<sup>67</sup> His idealistic perception of America as a land of freedom, abundance, sensuality and ease, gleaned from popular culture, appears to inform his attitude to painting in terms of formal qualities as well as subject. The popular culture of film, commercial advertising, television and the speed of modern travel, as well as art history, influenced his work. He found inspiration in products of the 'modern' world – airports, highways, bridges and crossings, stating that, for him, they have a heavenly quality.<sup>68</sup>

After arriving in America he teamed up with the Armenian-born painter Arshile Gorky, who acted as an artistic mentor. De Kooning did not pander to a commercial market but explored an individual path, his work continuously evolving and changing. He did not achieve financial success until he was around fifty years old. The paintings that resonate most with me are those completed in the 1970s after his move away from New York City to Long Island. To me, these paintings represent a culmination of his practice to a point where a harmonious relationship with his materials and processes existed. Curator John Elderfield and the artist Terry Winters discuss this period of the artist's development on the occasion of a de Kooning retrospective exhibition held at *The Museum of Modern Art* in New York in 2011. Winters says "de Kooning pushed paint to extremes: It was his method for generating pictures. He hits a peak in the mid-'70s—and he's off on his own at that point, I imagine?" Elderfield concurs, "At that point, yes. And it's funny because it's also the moment where he's most like the old masters he loved."<sup>69</sup> Winters comments on how contemporary these works look,

Because he was working a completely wet surface, there is a seamlessness, which gives his canvases an odd, screenlike quality. And that uniformity of the screen surprisingly opens up to illusionistic vistas. There is something so mysterious and contemporary about those '70s paintings now.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Susan Lake, *Willem de Kooning: The Artist's Materials* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2010). 3

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>68</sup> Charlotte Zwerin, *De Kooning on de Kooning* (Santa Monica, CA: Direct Cinema Limited). Statement by the artist

<sup>69</sup> John Elderfield and Terry Winters, "Depth Charge: Terry Winters Talks with John Elderfield About De Kooning," *Artforum International* 49, no. 10 (2011).332

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 332

## SECTION I: PHILOSOPHY AND CRITICISM

Here I discuss individual philosophers Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the ideas associated with existentialism and phenomenology and how they relate to de Kooning and his generation of mid-twentieth century artists. I also consider the influence of Clement Greenberg's criticism.

### Doubt

The notion of doubt is central to modernity during the twentieth century, in both art and literature, though it can be traced further back to the Romantic period of the 19th century. Danish existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) offers some of the clearest expressions of this idea of doubt and de Kooning was known to have read, and referred to his writings. Critic and historian Richard Shiff suggests that de Kooning was a postmodern artist before the term was introduced. He states that his “practice is rhizomatic, created on a Deleuzian plateau .... someone for whom the suggestion of possibilities would be more meaningful than the authoritative delineating of form.”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore he argues that the artist “undermined hierarchies, and any sense of logical development or idea of advancement.” De Kooning was constantly revising his paintings, and there are well documented descriptions of his difficulty in pronouncing a painting finished, and allowing it out of the studio, particularly in the first decades of his career.<sup>72</sup> He shared this behaviour with the late impressionist painter Paul Cezanne, whom de Kooning admired, who notoriously required countless sessions to complete a still life or landscape.<sup>73</sup>

Shiff has written extensively about de Kooning over a number of years. In texts such as *Doubt* (2008) and *Between Sense and de Kooning* (2011), he discusses the work in terms of its materiality, physicality and process as a phenomenological encounter, invoking the philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce,

We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have... Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Shiff, *Doubt*, Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts (New York: Routledge, 2008). 41

<sup>72</sup> Gary Garrels, “Three Toads in the Garden: Line, Color and Form,” in *Willem de Kooning: The Late Paintings, the 1980s* (Minneapolis: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Walker Art Center, 1995). 19-20

<sup>73</sup> Shiff.96

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 17. Originally published in “Some consequences of Four Incapacities” 1868 in Christian J. W. Kloesel, ed, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*.



Shiff refers to Pierce as an artist-philosopher who trusted his intuitions, but reserved a degree of doubt for his conclusions, applying a similar approach to the artist, and in particular, de Kooning. Shiff extrapolates on the idea that, when artists push beyond what they already know, they expose their work to chance, false starts, and dead ends as well as unanticipated discoveries.”<sup>75</sup>

### Kierkegaard

De Kooning drew on Kierkegaard’s idea of ‘the tremor’ in the first of three public talks on his work, a 1949 lecture titled “A Desperate View”. Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, published in 1843, drew its title from a line from Philippians 2:12, “...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” This phrase is a probable reference to Psalms 55:5, “Fear and trembling came upon me...”. Kierkegaard attempted to understand the anxiety present in Abraham when “God tested [him] and said to him, take Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering on the mountain that I shall show you.”<sup>76</sup> De Kooning drew on the ideas of the singularity of existence, and that of actions becoming meaningful when raised to the universal, when governed by a norm such as God’s will. De Kooning’s working practices – painting and drawing his subjects over and over until they became abstracted; attempting to understand or reveal something essential about them, and constantly questioning his practice – may reflect these ideas. A 1963 pencil sketch by de Kooning was captioned “No fear but a lot of trembling”, an obvious reference to the philosopher.<sup>77</sup> As is the line from his speech “A Desperate View”: “The only certainty today is that one must be self-conscious.”<sup>78</sup> Much of Kierkegaard’s philosophical work deals with the issues of how one lives as a ‘single individual’, giving priority to concrete human reality over abstract thinking, and highlighting the importance of personal choice and commitment. His thinking can be linked to phenomenology, existentialism, and influenced philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger whom I discuss below, amongst others.

### Existentialism

Existentialism entered the discussions of the New York School artists, particularly through the ideas and writing of the critic and champion of de Kooning, Harold Rosenberg

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 44-47

<sup>76</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling, Repetition: Kierkegaard’s Writings, VI,” ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983). 10

<sup>77</sup> Robert Storr, “A Last Light,” in *Willem de Kooning: The Late Paintings, the 1980s* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1995). 61

<sup>78</sup> Willem de Kooning, “A Desperate View”, The Willem de Kooning Foundation. <http://www.dekooning.org/documentation/words/a-desperate-view> (accessed March 29 2015).

(1906–1978). In his major 1952 article “The American Action Painters”, published in the leading modernist periodical of the time *ARTnews*, Rosenberg coined the term ‘Action Painting’. The article argues that the painter’s creative process is an act of necessary self-assertion, and expression of freedom and authenticity:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.<sup>79</sup>

‘Action painting’ was, for Rosenberg, an existential exercise, a brutally honest form of self-expression. “Each stroke had to be a decision, and was answered by a new question. By its very nature, action painting is painting in the medium of difficulties.”<sup>80</sup> Perhaps notions of doubt are transformed into existentialist actions. Arguably, de Kooning’s constant practice of questioning and cyclical reinvention was a reflection of this.

Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) commanded a huge following in the post Second World War period. Sartre’s position that an individual’s actions might give life meaning suggested the importance of the artist’s creative process. Through the artist’s physical struggle with his materials, a painting itself might ultimately come to serve as a lasting mark of one’s existence. Each of the artists involved with The New York School eventually developed an individual style, easily recognized as evidence of his or her artistic practice and contribution. Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* first appeared in English in 1953 and 1956 in two instalments. John Elderfield asserts that the books would have been read by de Kooning and his peers. Sartre writes about ‘le visqueux’ or ‘the slimy’. As Elderfield points out, parts of Sartre’s text read like an ekphrasis, a literary description of the visual art work of de Kooning:

I open my hands. I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me. Its mode of being is neither the reassuring inertia of the solid nor the dynamism like that in water which is exhausted in fleeing from me. It is soft, yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking, it lives obscurely under my fingers and I sense

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<sup>79</sup> Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Grove, 1961). 25 originally published in *Art News* 51/8, Dec. 1952, 25

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 33

it like a dizziness; it draws me to it as the bottom of a precipice might draw me. There is something like a tactile fascination in the slimy. I am no longer the master in arresting the process of appropriation.

It continues...

But at the same time the slimy is myself, from the very fact that I plan an appropriation of the slimy substance. That sucking of the slimy which I feel on my hands outlines a kind of continuity of the slimy substance in myself.<sup>81</sup>

This quote indicates a degree of uncertainty and doubt about the stability and 'perfection' of 'man'. A painting such as *Untitled XIII*, (Figure 5) is one of a series painted in 1975 after a five year period in which de Kooning had been concentrating on sculpture. In this series, executed quickly over a period of six months, de Kooning broke away from the habit of scrutinising and reworking his canvases repeatedly. He appears to have embraced the feeling of being out of control, and of confidently making the sense of the 'out of control' the central subject of painting. The luscious palette of red, yellow and blue, painted wet on wet assumes a binding role. The variety of its brushstrokes, emphatic mark-making and flecks of paint create a sense of dynamism of composition as the colours fuse and surge across the surface.

From the mid-1960s through to the 1970s de Kooning's paintings "wander, skate and skid" to quote Richard Shiff.<sup>82</sup> The impression of light on water inspired paintings made when he began spending time on Long Island.<sup>83</sup> This landscape may have contributed to the direction of the work and the sense of beauty, ease and movement that became more evident in this body of work.

### Phenomenology

As outlined above with reference to the influences of Kierkegaard and the existentialist thinking of Sartre, the different ways in which doubt might have influenced the thinking behind de Kooning's work seems clear. However the most direct and important philosophical or theoretical foundation for the place of doubt in de Kooning's thought

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<sup>81</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology," (London New York: Routledge, 2003). 629-630 First published in 1943, quoted in John Elderfield, *de Kooning: A Retrospective* (New York N.Y: Museum of Modern Art, 2011). 38

<sup>82</sup> Elderfield. 37 quoting Shiff

<sup>83</sup> Lake.36



Figure 5, Willem de Kooning, *Untitled VIII*, 1977, Oil on canvas, 177.8 x 203.2. (private collection)



Figure 6, Willem de Kooning, *Untitled XXI*, 1982, oil on canvas, 195.6 x 233.5cm. (Collection of Philadelphia Museum of Art)

and practice is the *Phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (1907–1961). His 1945 essay, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, examined Paul Cézanne’s investigations into the phenomena of visual perception. Merleau-Ponty argued that through painting, Cézanne discovered that “the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, art is not an exact science but a means of capturing the complexities of what the eye observes.<sup>85</sup> De Kooning, who admired Cézanne, viewed his own painting as a “way of working for a ‘fitting in’, a tightly interworked linking of surface and form, gesture and line.”<sup>86</sup> The influence of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas is evident when de Kooning spoke of Abstract Expressionism in terms of space and, to quote again from his lecture, “A Desperate View”, as his personal formulation of what Abstract Expressionism is:

It is the art whose only object is space. All things are fused in spatiality. The abstract artist tries to express his/her immersion in that spatiality, visualizing thereby the latter and the changes she/he may bring into play through the immersion.<sup>87</sup>

The ambiguity of space is consistent throughout de Kooning’s oeuvre and is, perhaps, the entry into his exploration of abstraction. In another famous lecture, “What Abstract Art Means to Me” (1951) de Kooning expresses his discontent with the ‘physicists’ space.’<sup>88</sup> He speaks of his admiration for the cubist space. In his pared back paintings of the 1980s de Kooning condensed the rich and tactile painterly qualities of his earlier work into narrow bands of often red and blue paint set against variously toned whites, simultaneously connoting surface and space. The narrow bands and thin, mobile lines of vivid colour cause the surface to seem to buckle and turn in space in an elusive manner. These paintings also represent the influence of Matisse, who admired the sense of freedom of the former’s work, *La Danse*.<sup>89</sup> In 1983 he commented: “I don’t want the pictures to look too easy... But Matisse, he took the work out of it. I would like to do that”. He added: “They’re like big signs, you know”.<sup>90</sup> These paintings could be seen as a condensation of his earlier work.

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<sup>84</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964). 14 (first published, 1954)

<sup>85</sup> Justin Wolf, “Existentialism in Modern Art” [www.theartstory.org/definition-existentialism.htm](http://www.theartstory.org/definition-existentialism.htm) (accessed 23 Jan 2015).

<sup>86</sup> Elderfield. 41

<sup>87</sup> De Kooning.

<sup>88</sup> Dimitri Ginev, “The Scope of Existential Spatiality,” *Coactivity: Philosophy, Communication* 18, no. 3 (2010). 18

<sup>89</sup> Elderfield. 450

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 465

On a visit to Philadelphia in 2012 I viewed an example of such a painting, *Untitled XXI*, 1982 (Figure 6). This work has floating qualities, akin to the reflective qualities of water, the ambiguous surface and fragmented space below. One feels they can enter into the painting because of the ‘openness’ of the composition, its white background and sparseness of line suggest forms moving across a surface. The arabesque lines, ribbons of undulating red and blue, evoke movement and instability. The use of white gives the work a sense of light. The painting has a temporal and spatial ambiguity.

This painting is an example of de Kooning’s desire to capture something of the inexpressible, the uncertain or tentative moment that can be found in his late practice of the 1980s. In this body of work, he did not want his paintings to display any trace of underpainting. Like his earlier compatriot Mondrian, he wished to create surfaces that were demonstrably handmade yet did not make a display of the temporality of their creation, so as not to look overworked or overcorrected. His paintings were washed with turpentine and water at the end of the day. A consequence of this desire to not overwork or overcorrect was to move on to a new canvas. In this period his output of paintings increased considerably. Termed the ‘Ribbon’ paintings, these works display an increased use of the taper’s knife (the flat bladed tool used in dry wall construction to spread spackle over taped joints) to spread swathes of thick paint into discreet bands or ribbons of varying widths.

### **The Significance of Clement Greenberg’s Criticism**

It is clear that de Kooning and his contemporaries were accessing ideas about art directly from reading philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty. Greenberg’s work implies that the links between the philosophers and the painters were essential to the trajectory of their practice. As, arguably, the most persuasive critic of the 1940s and 1950s Greenberg wielded much influence upon de Kooning’s generation, assisting in establishing an audience for these artists and becoming a champion of abstract art. His notion of art as formal problem-solving contrasts with Rosenberg’s notion of art as an intuitive, hard-won distillation of a life, and the latter’s commitment to Sartre’s existentialism. Greenberg’s review of de Kooning’s first exhibition in 1948 initiated the critical appreciation of the artist’s work. “De Kooning is an outright ‘abstract’ painter” who excluded recognisable imagery and referential content in his work to produce “an art that makes demands only on the optical imagination”, Greenberg wrote in *The Nation*.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.163

Greenberg supported the flattened and non-illusionistic space evident in the paintings of de Kooning. His formalism held that modern abstract painting was the purest and most advanced artistic style in all of human history. With his seminal 1939 essay, "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch", art theory in the era of Abstract Expressionism was launched. Greenberg held the core belief that Abstract Expressionism, or what he called 'American-Type' painting, was not only the purest art medium, but also the most aesthetically advanced in all of art history because its practitioners had created new ways to communicate the formal elements of painting on canvas. "Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can look, can travel through, only with the eye."<sup>92</sup>

As a formalist, Greenberg believed that qualities in painting, usually understood to be compositional elements such as line, value, colour and texture, and distinguished from technique on the one hand and content on the other, can be considered and enjoyed independently of the way in which a picture evokes the visible world, tells a story or expresses philosophical ideas.<sup>93</sup> Representational elements, not merely extraneous in Greenberg's thinking, were anathema to him. He demanded that painting be true to itself and to "all that was unique to the nature of its medium." He wanted artists "to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."<sup>94</sup>

The term 'situational', used by Greenberg to describe the painting of the time, applies directly to the work of de Kooning, such as in his article "Abstract and Representational" about the space of the painting. As the painter Louis Finkelstein wrote of de Kooning's work in 1950, "Instead of painting objects, he paints situations."<sup>95</sup> Greenberg's later critique of de Kooning was that he was too much of a late cubist, in that he fiddled about too much with fitting the image at the edges and corners.<sup>96</sup> His painting bears the trace of the hand and the mark of the brush as opposed to the more distanced and therefore 'pure' painting of Jackson Pollock.

Following Greenberg's praise of his 1948 exhibition, de Kooning reintroduced figurative elements to his work in his 'Woman' paintings of the 1950s. Greenberg was highly critical. He referred to this practice in de Kooning's work as 'homeless representation'.<sup>97</sup> The work

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<sup>92</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). 90

<sup>93</sup> Robert Williams, "Formalism", Oxford University Press <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.ezproxy.lib.rmit.edu.au/subscriber/article/grove/art/T028981>. (accessed March 28 2015).

<sup>94</sup> Greenberg, "Modernist Painting." 85

<sup>95</sup> Elderfield.15

<sup>96</sup> Robert Linsley and Richard Shiff, "Between Sense and de Kooning" <http://abstractcritical.com/article/between-sense-and-de-kooning/> (accessed 28 March 2015).

<sup>97</sup> Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism." 124-125

again became more abstract in later series but it seems that figure drawing was always a starting point. For Greenberg, the work of Jackson Pollock, de Kooning's rival, best represented his critical values. de Kooning's independence of thought is demonstrated by his continuing to follow his own path, even if in opposition to fashion.

## SECTION II: DE KOONING'S STUDIO PRACTICE

In this section I address the studio practice of de Kooning and how this affected the visual outcome of his work. As he was an artist who spent the majority of his time in the studio making work, I consider this the most important aspect of this discussion.

### Slipperiness

The idea of slipperiness, which I believe can be directly related to doubt, is imbued within de Kooning's work. "I must change to stay the same," de Kooning often said. Accordingly, he adapted his materials and techniques to best reflect his evolving response to the questions that arose in his practice.<sup>98</sup> Richard Shiff, whilst acknowledging the skill and thought that went into the paintings, has an interest in de Kooning's practice as manual work: a hand for example, putting paint onto canvas and creating something new, concrete, and specific. In making art, Shiff's conclusion is that artists are driven neither by unconscious psychological forces, as in some versions of Surrealism, nor by the internal logic of broader movements.<sup>99</sup> Instead, artists act on what Shiff calls tacit knowledge, intuition, or 'fast thinking', all of which emerge from ongoing experience and entail self-doubt as well as belief. De Kooning's often quoted comment, catches Shiff's attention:

When I'm falling, I'm doing all right: when I'm slipping, I say, 'Hey, this is very interesting'. It's when I'm standing upright that bothers me. I'm not doing so good. I'm stiff, you know.<sup>100</sup>

Shiff describes this as a form of "self-induced lack of balance".<sup>101</sup> He points out that this kept de Kooning's art alive for him:

It was the experience of letting each brushstroke impart 'its own point of view', even if—or especially if—the overall effect felt unsettled and unfinished, promising more painting to come instead of arriving at a final resolution.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Lake, 15-16

<sup>99</sup> Shiff, 57

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 89

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 89

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 94



This sense of constant reinvention is pronounced in de Kooning's lecture, "A Desperate View": "In art, one idea is as good as another... Art should not have to be a certain way... Style is a fraud." De Kooning repeatedly stated his opposition to dictatorial systems, rules or ideologies. An example is his comment about the work of Piet Mondrian, an artist he admired. "It was a horrible idea of ... Mondrian to try to force a style ... I think it is the most bourgeois idea to think one can make a style beforehand."<sup>103</sup>

In an interview conducted in his studio in 1959, de Kooning called himself a "slipping glimpser", and talked at length about the importance for his art of glimpsing tiny things. He stated that when he worked he was not painting what he saw but was "illustrating the emotion of a concrete experience."<sup>104</sup> In an interview conducted with critic David Sylvester he spoke again about flashes or slipping glimpses, stating:

Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's very tiny—very tiny content.<sup>105</sup>

The artist has said that he attempted to capture glimpsed images seen fleetingly from the corner of his eye, or from a car window, or on a television screen. Shiff has observed:

(T)he artist associated the glimpse with the most ordinary kind of 'happening' – somebody sitting on a chair, or a puddle of water reflecting light. He opposed it to things people think are important, 'whatever happens in newspapers.'<sup>106</sup>

This highlights the fact that, throughout his career, de Kooning's art remained firmly rooted in his daily experience, and that his "slipping glimpses" are a source of much of the imagery in his paintings. Each painting may represent a memory, a record of the commonplace or sensation from his daily life, recorded after the event in the studio. As he noted, "If I really think about it, it will come out in the painting".<sup>107</sup>

## Material and Methods

How de Kooning worked with and achieved his aim of capturing his perceived sensations and glimpsed visions are important to this study. De Kooning's studio practice is of interest because this is where the important breakthroughs occurred, and where he spent a large

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<sup>103</sup> Lake.14

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 19

<sup>105</sup> David Sylvester, "Willem de Kooning: Content Is a Glimpse, Interview with David Sylvester (1963)," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996).198 (Interview with Willem de Kooning conducted by David Sylvester published in 1963.

<sup>106</sup> Lake. 19 Quoting Shiff from 1994, *Willem de Kooning: Paintings*, Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art.

<sup>107</sup> Sylvester. 198

proportion of his time. Technical processes were harnessed in order to produce work that the artist considered to have the appearance of having been created with a sense of ease.

Susan F. Lake, in her 2010 book *Willem de Kooning: the artist's materials*, offers an in-depth study of the studio materials used by de Kooning. She begins her investigation with the premise that artists make stylistic changes in their work when they make “deliberate changes in their artistic procedures,” offering de Kooning as a case in point.<sup>108</sup> His experience and range of skills, gave him a knowledge of materials and craftsmanship that was a fundamental influence upon his art throughout his career. For example he utilised a wide variety of brushes and tools in order to create different effects. He wasn't bound by tradition but did whatever it took to achieve the effect he sought. He implemented techniques such as layering paint of differing drying speeds, so that cracking occurred. Most famously, during the 1960s and 1970s, de Kooning mixed artist's oil paints with safflower cooking oil, water and one or more solvents, to achieve the consistency he desired. Once he had thoroughly combined a number of his tube paints on a glass palette, he would scoop the blended paints into a bowl and then add the oil, water and solvent, whipping the ingredients with a brush to achieve a fluffy consistency. The increased liquidity and slipperiness of de Kooning's binding medium, and his use of a smooth white support, allowed him to move his brush more quickly across the face of the painting.

While quick brushstrokes were a characteristic of his earlier works, the greater speed with which he applied the more fluid paint is apparent in this later work.<sup>109</sup> De Kooning is known for his use of varied materials using trade paints and adapting and modifying paints to suit his desires. Another time he coarsened the texture of alkyd paint with quartz and ground glass. He forged an original style by manipulating both conventional and non-art materials in extreme ways.<sup>110</sup>

Lake demonstrates that de Kooning wasn't an 'action painter': instead, many of the elements in his paintings that look like they were painted quickly and spontaneously were, in fact, painted laboriously and were the product of a sophisticated understanding of how disparate paints interact. Many visitors to de Kooning's studio described his working methods as protracted rather than slow in speed.<sup>111</sup> He worked in spurts of feverishly

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<sup>108</sup> Lake.71

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 17 for example in *Woman Sag Harbour*, 1965

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.Back cover

<sup>111</sup> Elderfield. 207

concentrated activity separated by long periods of studying the image. Perhaps the desire for an 'appearance of spontaneity' in the work is a sign of uncertainty, and therefore the image produced retains a trace of the uncertainty in its making.

De Kooning found ways to make marks that were both purposeful and last-minute. There is an interesting story about what he learned from Arshile Gorky. Gorky said that you determine where you are going to put the line, and at the last minute you move your hand and put it somewhere else. There is the sense that de Kooning's skill resided in building up a kind of resistance to conventional facility. And this is only achieved, paradoxically, by habit and by repetition.<sup>112</sup> Even Harold Rosenberg acknowledged that de Kooning never used improvisational techniques exclusively, "Though they may start with a scribble or a sign, his forms are animated by conscious intuitions... Without being premeditated, his movements occur under the scrutiny of his aesthetic conscience."<sup>113</sup>

In his search for fresh ways to render his subject matter, he developed innovative technical methods and played with a range of materials. Lake argues that de Kooning's use of inexpensive commercial paints was not only because they were all he could afford, but because they helped him create the illusion of frenzied action-painting. In Zwerin's documentary film, de Kooning explains his purchases of one gallon each of black and white paint as representing freedom because he could change his mind if he wanted to.<sup>114</sup> References to commonplace or inconsequential events were alluded to, telescoped into shapes and colours to suggest fleeting images quickly viewed.

De Kooning spent a lot of time constructing complex compositions. The artist Gus Falk, who had observed de Kooning at work, recalled of the painting *Attic*, 1949, "He made a drawing of it, to work on the parts where he felt there was a problem. He worked on that picture carefully. 'Maybe I could throw a line here', he would say. He would erase parts, redraw it. In other words he did it like Ingres. He was not throwing his guts on the wall."<sup>115</sup> His protracted, carefully thought out method went hand in hand with his resistance to finishing his work, often making changes to a painting up until the moment it left his studio.<sup>116</sup> De Kooning sometimes worked on canvases for years (his *Woman I* 1950–52,

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<sup>112</sup> Elderfield and Winters, "Depth Charge: Terry Winters Talks with John Elderfield About de Kooning." 332

<sup>113</sup> Elderfield. 207

<sup>114</sup> Zwerin.

<sup>115</sup> Elderfield. 211

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 211

for example, took two years to complete). However, during this time he often scraped the paint off the surface to start again the following day. To keep paint from drying he applied sheets of newspaper to the surface, sometimes leaving them overnight. A statement of 1981 elaborates on this practice:

I take it easy. I put on and take off paint until I start realizing I am getting the picture. I slowly try to change it. I make the paint so I can scoop the excess off. I take paint off or keep it from drying with newspaper... and let it stand overnight or even a whole day... So after that I have the design and not too much paint on until I am ready to give the whole thing the business... When the thing starts to talk to me, I know what to do. I'm not always right but I think I know what to do. In other words, if it starts drying I have to be ready.<sup>117</sup>

The desire for a sense of intuitive ease, achieved by much hard labour and agonising (as discussed above), is an interesting contradiction. To attempt to represent a momentary sensation or something quickly glimpsed in paint on canvas is paradoxical. As previously mentioned, the ease evinced in Matisse's painting was an inspiration for de Kooning. A quote from Henri Matisse, himself said: "To give yourself completely to what you're doing while simultaneously watching yourself do it – that's the hardest of all for those who do work by instinct."<sup>118</sup> Shiff discusses de Kooning's work in terms of a 'bodily knowledge', that is, practices that become imprinted on the body by years of experience.<sup>119</sup> De Kooning devised strategies to circumvent his own 'muscle memory' and technical skill.<sup>120</sup>

One way in which he might have achieved this aim is through an ongoing drawing practice, as linearity is a signature of much of his work, used in various ways. While not representing self-doubt, there appears to be a questioning by de Kooning of his own facility. Perhaps the desire to capture fleeting impressions relates to this. De Kooning drew from the figure and later, when television was introduced, sat up at night drawing from the screen, even when it became a blur after televised programs ceased later in the night.<sup>121</sup> Throughout his career, Klaus Kertess wrote, "de Kooning frequently changed, and almost always employed the same studio techniques to implement that change." His working methods were

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 460, quoting Avis Berman article published in *Artnews* 81, no 2, 1982

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 22 Sourced from Hilary Spurling *Matisse the Master: The Conquest of Colour*, 2005 115, letter to Amélie Matisse March, 31, 1912

<sup>119</sup> Elderfield and Winters, "Depth Charge: Terry Winters Talks with John Elderfield About de Kooning." 332

<sup>120</sup> Elderfield. 19

<sup>121</sup> Richard Shiff, *Between Sense and de Kooning* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011). 18

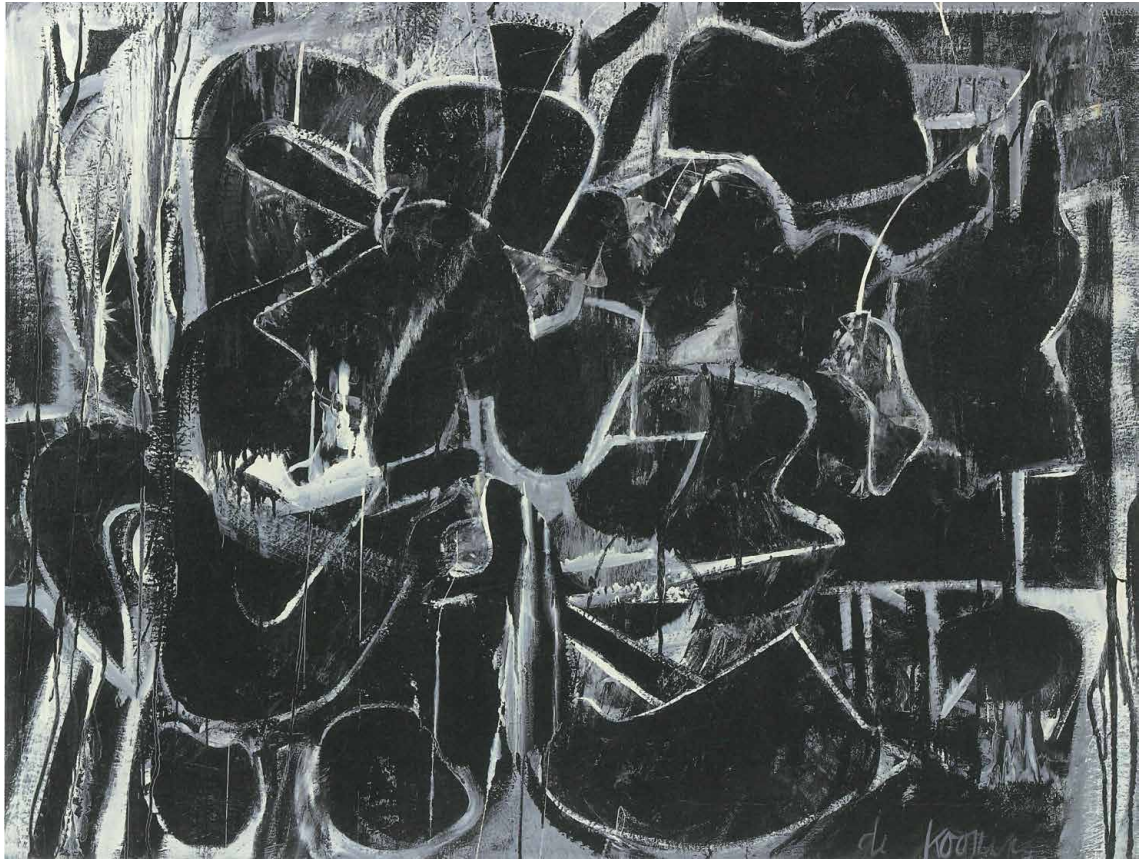


Figure 7, Willem de Kooning, *Painting*, 1948, oil and enamel on canvas, 108.3 x 142.5 cm. (Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

familiar yet always modifiable.<sup>122</sup> There is the long standing use of drawing and of tracing previous works to transfer onto new works, to adapt, modify and use as a starting point.

<sup>123</sup> For example, de Kooning used oil and enamel sign paint to make the series of black and white abstractions, exhibited in 1948. He began these works such as *Painting* (Figure 7), by transferring segments of figurative drawings to the canvas, then applying layers of paint.<sup>124</sup>

This interplay of black forms and white brush strokes are completely abstract. Within the scope of a black and white palette, de Kooning has created a range of drips, bleeds, solid forms and dissolving streaks.

Another indication of de Kooning's diverse approaches to capturing the fleeting impression was his technique of blotting still-wet canvases with paper, and using that paper as the basis for what Lake terms a kind of artist-instigated binary fission.<sup>125</sup> By analysis of paint

<sup>122</sup> Elderfield. 483

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.483

<sup>124</sup> Lake. 32

<sup>125</sup> Tyler Green, "Modern Art Notes", Louise Blouin Media Inc. <http://blogs.artinfo.com/modernartnotes/2010/10/using-science-to-reveal-truths-about-willem-de-kooning/> (accessed March 25 2014).

samples, she has revealed that this technique arose from de Kooning's practice of covering his paintings with paper or cloth in an effort to keep them wet. Lake also uses technical analysis to reveal how de Kooning mined his knowledge of art history for tips about how to use layers of paint and specific kinds of paints to achieve particular effects.<sup>126</sup>

### SECTION III: CONNECTIONS TO MY PRACTICE

My experience of notions of doubt and uncertainty cannot be dissociated from my studio practice and use of materials and techniques. Certain choices of material and a desire to create and capture fleeting situations in paint, relate my practice to the discussion above. My choice of materials such as acrylic sheet (Perspex) as a support for my paintings is partially for its slippery quality. I use paint mixed with stand oil to create a flowing medium to apply to the surface. The smooth materiality of the surface of acrylic sheet is utilised to create paintings in which the medium of paint slides across, unhindered by a textured surface. Passing the scraper across the field of applied paint at a particular moment freezes this configuration of paint in time and is a punctuation mark.

I use a wet-on-wet technique, completing paintings in one session. The process I use creates a screen-like digital effect. When I apply paint to an acrylic sheet it is a provisional aspect of the process of making paintings – I may wipe it off and recommence. The painting is in a state of flux until the final point where I scrape the paint, not knowing entirely what will occur during the scraping process. In this process there is an element of chance, a degree of abnegation of control over the outcome. Because of this process, the work is in flux and may take multiple directions until a decision is made to conclude the painting by scraping it. There exists a certain congruency with de Kooning's practice of always working wet on wet, keeping the painting fresh by wiping the canvas clean at the end of a day and commencing afresh the following day. His painting could, therefore, go in any direction from day to day.

Another connection is the use of the painted line. The series of works I made in 2011–2012 in response to a brief to create an installation for the Department of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology at Monash University, Clayton Campus is a group of paintings on transparent acrylic of various sizes that were suspended in a group in front of the glass-fronted foyer of a building. (Figures 65–71) I decided to abandon any direct attempt to represent or reference

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

any specific aspect of the Department's research. I realised that the imagery that I was creating connected with that produced through the imaging technology used in scientific research. Some of the strategies used within this scientific discipline to represent discoveries visually are staining, colour coding, florescence, and modelling. For these works I used painted lines to create a sense of connections, clustering, pattern and motility that could relate to proteins on a cellular and sub-cellular level, and to strings and strands folding and collapsing.

For this piece I limited my colour palette and the types of marks I made, thereby creating a series of panels that were connected. I did not entirely cover the supporting panels with paint, leaving some transparent space so that viewers could look through the panels. Marks used included dots, dynamic lines and squiggly lines. The transparent acrylic support could relate to slides and petri dishes used in the research laboratory. The flattened lines that splay out over the surface point to the materiality of the paint.

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During a long career and a vast body of work and studio time, de Kooning found unique ways of responding to the influences of the environment, art history, critical ideas and his own experience. His paintings abound with movement and light and relish in the very act of painting. The pertinence of this discussion of de Kooning's work to my project is in the commitment to painting by this artist and his ability to consistently question, reinvent and renew his practice. The artist's aspiration to create paintings that appear unlaboured, ambiguous and slippery, allowing one work to lead to the next, going beyond what he knows, courting the out of control and making visible the potential for continual renewal of the painting medium coincides with my own interests. De Kooning is a significant artist in terms of his legacy for contemporary painters, in particular, artists who use gesture for its own sake to create paintings that rely on abstract forms, spatial ambiguity and painting that is as much about the activity of painting as the painting itself.

American critic Raphael Rubinstein in *Art in America* discusses the existential angst and doubt that plagued artists such as de Kooning, Cezanne and Giacometti, and contrasts this with the doubt of the contemporary artist who is dealing with questions of 'the end of painting' and a different sort of doubt. This group of artists do not aim to make

monumental, high production value paintings and, like Matisse, do not want there to be a visible struggle on the canvas. These painters, who are following in the footsteps laid out by de Kooning, create the kind of painting that privileges the unfinished so-called ‘minor painting’ – something Rubinstein calls ‘provisional painting’<sup>127</sup> – and will be discussed through the work of the painters Raoul de Keyser, Mary Heilmann and Tomma Abts in the following chapter.

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<sup>127</sup> Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting.” 123, 134



## CHAPTER THREE: The Provisional, the Performative

In previous chapters, through the discussion of Paul Klee and Willem de Kooning, I have identified a theme of doubt and uncertainty that is intertwined with the history of abstraction in painting. I have explored how this informed the studio practice of these early and mid-twentieth century painters. I continue to examine the theme of doubt in this chapter, with a focus on more recent artists who stand out not only for their continuation of traditions in abstract art but for their innovations. I look at the Belgian painter Raoul De Keyser (1930–2012), American, Mary Heilmann, (b. 1940) and London based, German-born Tomma Abts (b. 1967). The artists focussed on here, I suggest, have inherited these notions of doubt and uncertainty. In the context of late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century thought, their work references earlier artists, and questions or extends the ideas of Modernism. Doubt appears to be apparent in the visual aspect of their work in formal elements displaying transience, provisionality, and ambiguity. With an awareness of art history these artists continue to explore the possibilities and potentiality of abstract painting, using appropriation, recovery and repetition. The Modernist geometric painting and abstract expressionism of their predecessors is reinvented, or forms a starting point for the new. In this chapter I also extend upon the discussion of the poetic to include the concept of the performative. This idea comes from contemporary critical reappraisals of Clement Greenberg's thinking and the *New York School* painters that have had a significant impact upon those who have followed.

After introducing these artists and their working methods I shall consider them in relation to the legacy of Clement Greenberg, whose impact upon abstract painting persists. I shall then discuss the concept of the grid which underpins the painting of each of these artists. I extend upon the ideas of doubt by discussing that of 'the provisional' as outlined by North American critic Raphael Rubinstein, who has identified a tendency to spurn high craft and finish in favour of a more "makeshift, seemingly anti-market, esthetic", in recent times.<sup>128</sup> Time, movement and music, the themes I have identified in relation to Klee are revisited in relation to these artists. I also consider formal aspects of their work in order to tease out these themes as well as critical responses to the work, such as that of Berlin-based critic Jan Verwoerht who discusses Abts's working process in relation to the idea of latency. Unlike their predecessors these three painters make relatively small scale works, and the installation of their paintings in the gallery space has become an important consideration. On various

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 122

levels, the work of these three painters is important to my own practice in showing how it is possible to respond to the tradition of abstract art, while also moving beyond.

### ***Raoul De Keyser***

Belgian painter Raoul De Keyser habitually worked on a modest scale. It has been said that his work has a 'chamber music like' nature, the inspiration derived from the artist's immediate environment in Deinze, Belgium.<sup>129</sup> In the 1960s De Keyser was a member of *Nieuwe Visie* (New Vision), a group that sought to reinvigorate the tradition of formalist painting in Europe by concentrating on prosaic subjects and simplified imagery. In subsequent years, the circles, lines, spots or blurs in his painting became increasingly abstract and open to interpretation, an exploration of painting itself. His work has been cited as inspirational by a younger generation of painters such as Tomma Abts. Raoul De Keyser did not achieve public recognition for his work until he was a mature artist. His titles are somewhat expressive, for example *Fresh*, *Perplexing*, *Sky Blue*, *Drift* and *Remnant*; he also made use of the non-committal *Untitled*. They enhance the perception of these paintings as impressions, with a sense of lightness of touch, delicacy and an ephemeral nature. De Keyser employs a subdued palette of blues, greens, greys and browns. His paintings involve an interplay between field and incident; shapes float and drift upon a pale ground and may refer to the sea and sky.

### ***Mary Heilmann***

American West Coast born, New York-based, Mary Heilmann has pursued an individual and independent way of working. Her painting since the 1970s has been a consistent investigation of colour and the grid. Following a degree in literature, poetry and ceramics, and a Master of Art in ceramics and sculpture in California, Heilmann made sculpture. Moving to New York City in 1968 she took up painting. It wasn't until 1986, when she was taken on by Pat Hearn's New York gallery, which showed other painters she admired such as Philip Taaffe, that she gained recognition, and it was only in the mid-1990s that her work began to take off commercially. After a solo show at the *New Museum* in 2008 she became a more visible artist internationally. I was fortunate enough to see this exhibition during a visit to New York City at this time.

Mary Heilmann's paintings appear spontaneous, which may relate to the artist's professed *modus operandi*. She says:

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<sup>129</sup> Stephan Berg, *Raoul De Keyser: Replay: Gemälde 1964-2008 = Paintings 1964-2008* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 11

I think about it forever and then I make it physically. The reason I don't just fool around making it physically goes back to thinking about how the Abstract Expressionists worked, just duking it out, poking the painting, rubbing it off, and putting it back on. I am just too lazy to do that, so I like to just think about it forever and then finally try it out. And a lot of times it comes out right."<sup>130</sup>

Heilmann's paint is applied relatively thinly (in comparison to her predecessors) and appears unlaboured, graphic and flatter. There is a sense of playfulness about the paintings, of playing with Modernist formalism. While there is often a sense of humour to Heilmann's titles, the work is a serious non-ironic exploration of the ongoing potential of the medium of paint.

Mary Heilmann's paintings rely on colour for their impact, evoking an upbeat ambiance. A recurring theme in her work is the use of primary colours and brushy, organic-looking paint work. This painting pulses with energy and with what American art and cultural critic Dave Hickey describes as 'insouciance'.<sup>131</sup> In 1979 Heilmann made pink and black paintings. Using pink and black together, she suggests, was a way to capture the extremes of love and grief and to represent the influence of punk and 'New Wave' fashion (which sampled a 1950s décor colour palette).<sup>132</sup> The critical response to these works at the time was hostile. "It was radical at the time", says Elizabeth Armstrong. "Mary was choosing a fashion colour, a street colour, a gendered colour—and then she painted with it on a very serious and grand scale. I think this captures the essence of who Mary Heilmann is."<sup>133</sup> Heilmann's colour palette became broader in the 1990s, but continued to be vibrant. Heilmann has also mentioned that she is inspired by digital colours, such as a range of pinks flooding the screen in a *Simpsons* animated cartoon.<sup>134</sup>

### ***Tomma Abts***

German born, London-based artist Tomma Abts shares similar interests to Mary Heilmann in regard to using geometric shapes and the emotional appeal of colour. However Abts's paintings have a measured, painstaking appearance and sometimes a sombre mood. She works in acrylic and oil, building up her designs from repetitive geometrical elements that seem to follow in the tradition of artists like Sonia Delauney or Sophie Tauber Arp, but

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<sup>130</sup> Mary Heilmann, "Mary Heilmann: Every Piece Has a Backstory", ART21 <http://www.art21.org/texts/mary-heilmann/interview-mary-heilmann-every-piece-has-a-backstory> (accessed May 17 2014).

<sup>131</sup> Elizabeth Armstrong, "To Be Someone," in *Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone* (California: Orange County Museum, 2007). 24

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 27

<sup>133</sup> Jori Finkel, "Mary Heilmann Packs Abstract Painting with as Much Personal History and Emotional Content as It Can Hold," *ARTnews*, no. December (2007). 134 (quoting Elizabeth Armstrong)

<sup>134</sup> Mary Heilmann, "Inspiration", Art21 <http://www.art21.org/artists/mary-heilmann>.

still look completely her own. Despite their highly designed appearance, the paintings are the result of an organic, intuitive process. They are hand drawn, without rulers or masking tape. They involve complex shapes that are layered and woven in different ways with added highlights, shadows and a sense of depth. Contrary to their final appearance, the shapes in Abts's paintings are formed by being painted around. Sometimes the first layers of the painting are visible, at other times the surface is thickly painted and textured due to the layers of built up paint that creates a three dimensional effect. The paintings are worked on over a long period of time, often years. Holding the canvas in the crook of her arm and later working on it flat, she selects colour intuitively. All of Abts's paintings on canvas measure 48 x 38 centimetres and the titles are derived from a dictionary of German first names.

Tomma Abts's work takes on a colour scheme that is rich and somewhat neutral. The colours are muted, 'dimmed down', due to over-painting. They utilise tonal variation and have a retro feel, the colour evocative of a particular period. Work completed in the 2000s contains a palette that potentially invokes a 1930's 'Eastern Bloc' era: murky greens and browns. Later work of 2011–2013 has a brighter, somewhat 1980's colour palette using pink and yellow. In describing her working process Abts articulates a strategy that hangs between intuition and more conscious decision making. Her aim is to free painting from formal concerns by treating the process or event of painting as the subject proper. It is a process that retains interest for her as each painting grows in an organic fashion, and can be surprising to the artist. "While working on it I am always open to what I might do with it next, nothing is fixed."<sup>135</sup> Abts has stated:

My goal is not to make something unseen, but maybe an incentive – not knowing what the outcome might be is what makes me want to start another painting. I have no plans, sketches or preconceptions when I begin. It is just decision after decision – an ongoing process of putting something onto the canvas and then editing it, then putting something down and editing it again – and in that way slowly constructing something. I think 'unseen' has to do with the openness of the process. The making itself leads the way. The image is the manifestation of the process.<sup>136</sup>

Abts's approach may be related to Klee's idea of 'making visible' – an intuitive manner of working which leads to a revelation.

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<sup>135</sup> Christopher Bedford, "Dear Painter ..." *Frieze*, no. 145, March (2012). 101

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 101

## SECTION I: SPIRITUAL, THE GRID, MOVEMENT/TIME

### Spiritual

The artists discussed here ‘continue’ traditions laid out by Klee, in regard to a belief in a spiritual or an inexplicable aspect to their art practice. Heilmann is an example of an artist who, without being explicit allows for the sense of an unknowable or spiritual dimension to her practice. Heilmann was asked, “What is art for?” She replied “To take us to a spiritual, high place.”<sup>137</sup> “Looking at abstract art is for me like doing non-verbal philosophy, symbolic logic, non-number mathematics. It is like music, because it has a narrative without a story, without people: a drama without words.”<sup>138</sup> “My spiritual life is very important to me and I think the artworks are icons,” said Heilmann, who believes in the ecumenical power of art to “transport a person in a soulful, rich way, without having any fear of punishment or Hell or sin.”<sup>139</sup>

In a 2012 interview with Christopher Bedford, Tomma Abts stated that emotional expressiveness is closely connected to the personal handling of material. Bedford proposes that “for contemporary artists who make work grounded in process and materiality there is a metaphysical property to the work. Without having preconceived conceptual, metaphysical or historical objectives that ‘abstraction’ suggests- there is a kind of secular faith in the possibilities of non-objective image making.”<sup>140</sup>

Abts is quoted as saying that ‘higher beings’ are involved in the process of forging something from nothing. “But when I paint I have to deal with the problems at hand.”<sup>141</sup> She cites Sigmar Polke who, she says, in the 1960s perfectly summed up what she calls a sense of a ‘higher being.’ “Most painters have the experience that painting ‘happens’ not when you try really hard, but in the moment when you let go. Things can fall into place in a way you couldn’t have conceived of before. ... For me, painting is a concrete experiment that is anchored in the material I am handling,” she says. “Spirituality does not feel comfortable. Metaphysical concerns – in the sense of examining the properties and possibilities of an object – sounds better.”<sup>142</sup> She refers to something that is indescribable but lies within the act of painting.

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<sup>137</sup> Mary Heilmann, “Questionnaire” [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/mary\\_heilmann/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/mary_heilmann/) (accessed 6 April 2014).

<sup>138</sup> Mary Heilmann, “Conversations with Paintings”, Tate [http://cloud.hauserwirth.com/documents/7usLC5imFBxMiI19SW5k9UbfbpEz9csz8W1yfKa5wbgok3so19/tateetc\\_autumn2011\\_mh-ft0hwr.pdf](http://cloud.hauserwirth.com/documents/7usLC5imFBxMiI19SW5k9UbfbpEz9csz8W1yfKa5wbgok3so19/tateetc_autumn2011_mh-ft0hwr.pdf) (accessed 6 April 2014).

<sup>139</sup> Mary Heilmann, “Mary Heilmann in ‘Fantasy’”, PBS <http://www.pbs.org/art21/watch-now/segment-mary-heilmann-in-fantasy> (accessed 12 April 2014).

<sup>140</sup> Bedford, “Dear Painter ...”. 101

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 101

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 101

Laura Hoptman, in her essay about Abts's work, "Art for an Anxious Time," discusses her work in relation to the history of abstraction and cites a current desire for more metaphysical attributes. She refers to Paul Klee's diary notes and his comparison to a crystal: "the result of the geometry of nature, both organic and systematic. An abstract form that erases binaries."<sup>143</sup> On the other hand the critical framework surrounding these artists is informed by more rationalist thought.

### The Grid

A characteristic of the painting shared by De Keyser, Heilmann and Abts, linking their work to earlier abstract painting, is the 'grid'. Symbolic of high modernism, grid structures demonstrate, as Rosalind Krauss has articulated in her 1979 article "Grids", the very autonomy of the domain of art. Through their flat, geometric, ordered structures grids are, to use Krauss's words, anti-natural, anti-mimetic and anti-real.<sup>144</sup> The grid appears to be an armature against which painting is attached in the work of De Keyser, Heilmann and Abts. Their paintings acknowledge the flatness of the picture plane and use geometric devices in their imagery. At the same time their approach is painterly and provides evidence of the artist's hand and the sensation of painting.

De Keyser's paintings, although organic, refer to the grid. The serial structures and grids in his work never have a rigid dimension. The grid is referenced, by way of the influence of man made things, such as board games, sporting fields, windows or as in (Figure 8) a swimming pool, at the same time as referencing the materiality of paint, and the ephemerality of nature.

Mary Heilmann's paintings usually contain an irregular pattern based upon a grid, a rhythmic repetition of geometric or organic shapes. As the following quote from an online slideshow indicates, her use of the grid is in full consciousness of the tradition it evokes:

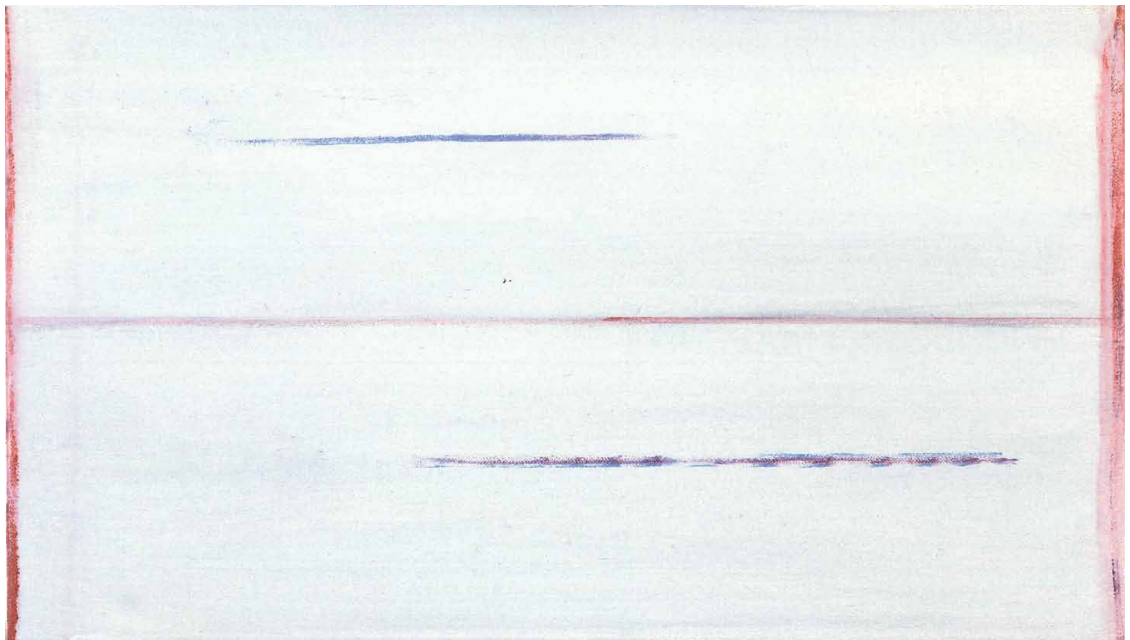
At a certain point, I'd put on my masking tape and paint all over the place so that you'd have this hard edge thing and this gestural thing going on at the same time. And that was a major breakthrough. You'd get it both ways. You'd get Albers and de Kooning in the same painting.<sup>145</sup>

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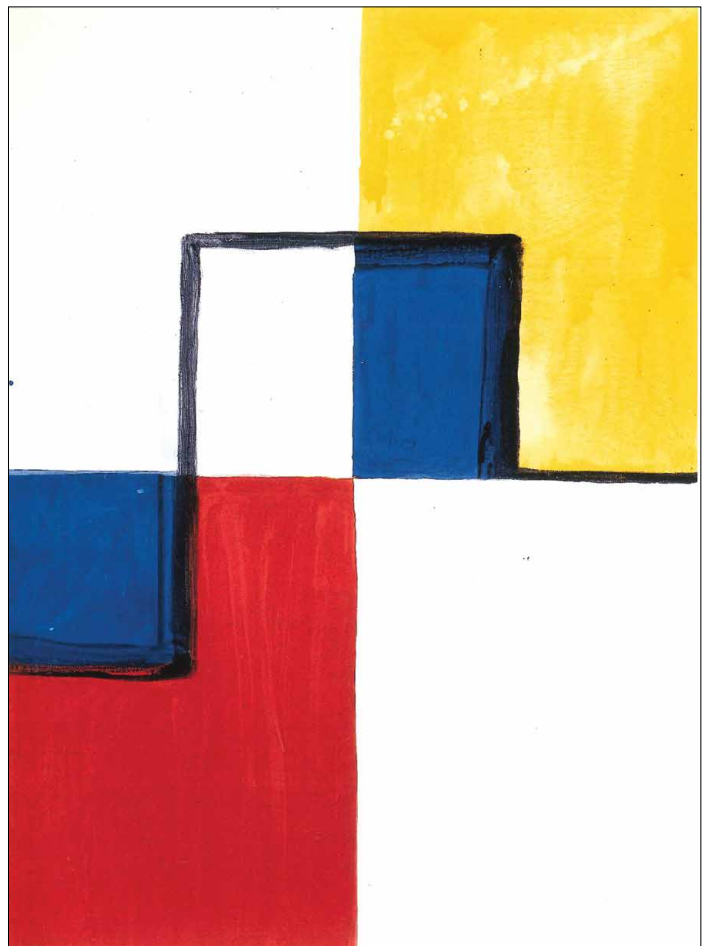
<sup>143</sup> Laura Hoptman, "Tomma Abts: Art for an Anxious Time," in *Tomma Abts* (New York: Phaidon, 2008). 14

<sup>144</sup> Krauss. 9

<sup>145</sup> Mary Heilmann, "Little 9 X 9 (1973)", PBS.org <http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/mary-heilmann/little-9-x-9-1973?slideshow=1> (accessed 10 September 2014).



**Figure 8**, Raoul De Keyser, *Aquatic*, 2009,  
oil and gesso on canvas, 24.1 x 4.2 cm.



**Figure 9**, Mary Heilmann, *Little Mondrian*, 1985, acrylic and  
watercolour on canvas,  
76.2 x 55.9 cm.

Paintings such as *Little Mondrian*, 1985 (Figure 9) offer examples of Heilmann's 'riffs', on the basic grid format. This work references the high modernist artist Piet Mondrian by way of the colour palette – red, blue, yellow and white as well as the composition. The looseness and irregularity of the brushwork is more personal and is in contrast to Mondrian's meticulous, more opaque renditions. The playfulness of the work differs from that of Klee, whose drawing has a whimsical quality. It is perhaps a more knowing rendition or interpretation of an artwork from the past. The titling of this work is typical of Heilmann's play with the history of geometric abstraction. Other references to artistic predecessors are Mondrian in *Manhattan Shuffle* 1986. *Malevich Spin* is an obvious tribute to the Russian artist, quoting his Suprematism, 18th Construction of 1915. *Red, Yellow and Blue Knot*, 1979, evokes Barnett Newman's famous series of paintings *Who's afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue*.

The ghost of a grid is also apparent in Tomma Abts work, for example (Figure 10). Perhaps it relates to her early practice in both painting and 16mm film, which were based on the grid. She made large-scale paintings and films in which she scratched lines onto the celluloid. She has commented that she found the grid limiting, her desire was to show more complex situations.<sup>146</sup> As with Heilmann and De Keyser, the grid in her work is implied. It recalls the constructivist and Bauhaus traditions, and then distorts the geometry of the grid in an intuitive manner.

The grid as used by these three artists seems to parallel their relationship with their modernist predecessors. It positions their work in relationship to the 'certainty', of a formal grid or the absoluteness of the thinking of Greenberg, but it is organic, fragile, transient and asymmetric. It is therefore connected to the idea of the provisional.

### **Movement/Time**

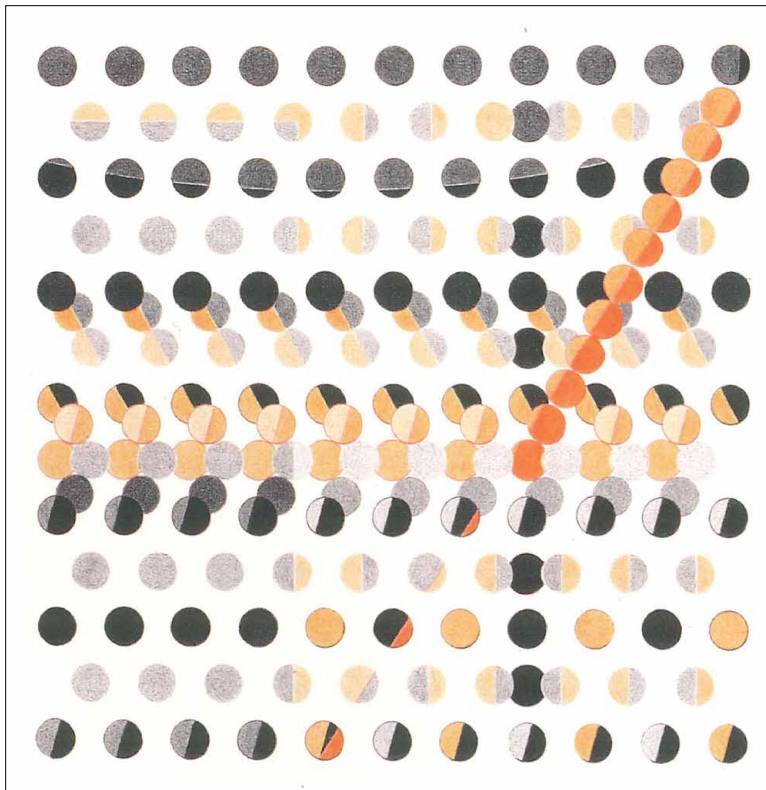
As discussed in relation to Paul Klee and Willem de Kooning, for the artists examined in this chapter movement and temporality are also significant. Here I look at their practices in relation to the representation of movement and time. John Elderfield wrote of Henri Matisse:

It always takes time [...] to read a painting. Even with a painting that presents itself instantaneously, we will want to explain that instantaneity to ourselves by returning to it, to examine its parts and hold them in readiness in our mind until they fall back into place and can be perceived instantaneously again."<sup>147</sup>

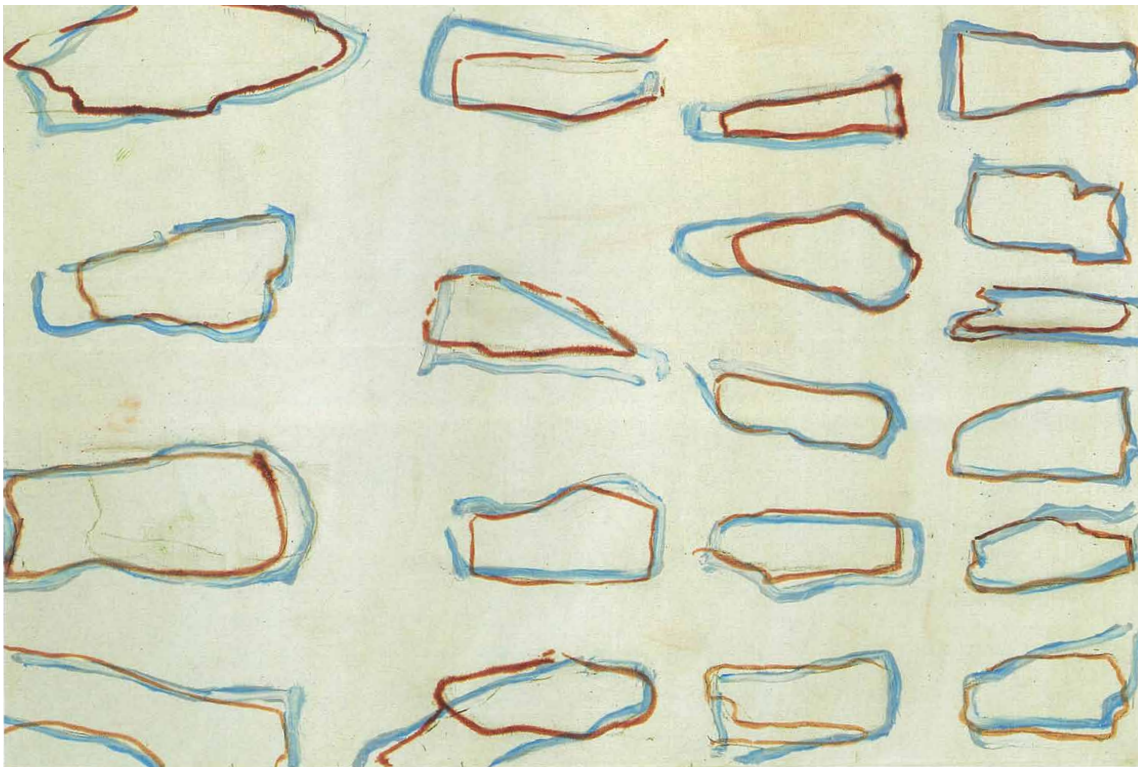
<sup>146</sup> Tomma Abts, Fecteau, Vincent, "Some Similarities," *Parkett* 82, no. May (2009). 32

<sup>147</sup> John Elderfield, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992). 63





**Figure 10,** Tomma Abts,  
*Untitled #7*, 2007, pencil  
& coloured pencil on paper,  
84.1 x 59.4 cm.



**Figure 11,** Raoul de Keyser, *Retour 1*, 1999,  
oil on canvas, 110 x 167cm.

This statement could equally apply to the paintings of de Keyser, Heilmann and Abts.

Raoul De Keyser's paintings display a sense of lightness and ephemerality and therefore a sense of movement and temporality. The geometric but organic shapes and lines used in his compositions often appear to float or drift on a white or bluish field that may reference sky or sea, as for example in *Retour 1* (Figure 11). There is a photographic or filmic effect to his paintings despite their absence of representation. The photographic character of some of his works is achieved through the use of thin emulsions of paint and the suggestion of movement via blurring.

On many levels Heilmann's paintings are imbued with a sense of movement and duration. They are seemingly simple paintings which have layers of complexity. They also have a real-life quality of motion because it takes time to fully experience the complexity of a painting upon viewing. A consistent device Heilmann has used in her work is to attach two canvases together to create an asymmetric object, often having a dynamic diagonal composition. This invites a viewing which scans from one section to the other.

Critic, curator and academic Terry Myers has made a close study of the painting *Save the Last Dance for Me*, 1979 (Figure 12). Myers suggests that because the pink shapes are not perfect rectangles, but are geometrically wonky, a slight yet persistent swaying motion is brought into the painting. And that it is this motion that undermines the pure, formal condition of the work.<sup>148</sup> Myers also argues that the painting could be read as a time lapse image of one shape shifting form across a dance floor.<sup>149</sup> Myers writes:

It is [...] a durational picture of isolated yet repetitive and sequential moments of an event. Opening the reading up to the type of compositional forms found in music. The life story of its production must be a – if not the – significant factor in the work's successful creation of a palpable sense of time in its visual rhythms. The painting has a beat. It also has attitude.<sup>150</sup>

Myers uses a reference to Michael Fried's 1967 text *Art and Objecthood* to emphasize a way in which Heilmann subverts modernism. Fried ended by saying "presentness is grace".<sup>151</sup> What made presentness attractive for Fried, Myers says, was that it existed outside of time.

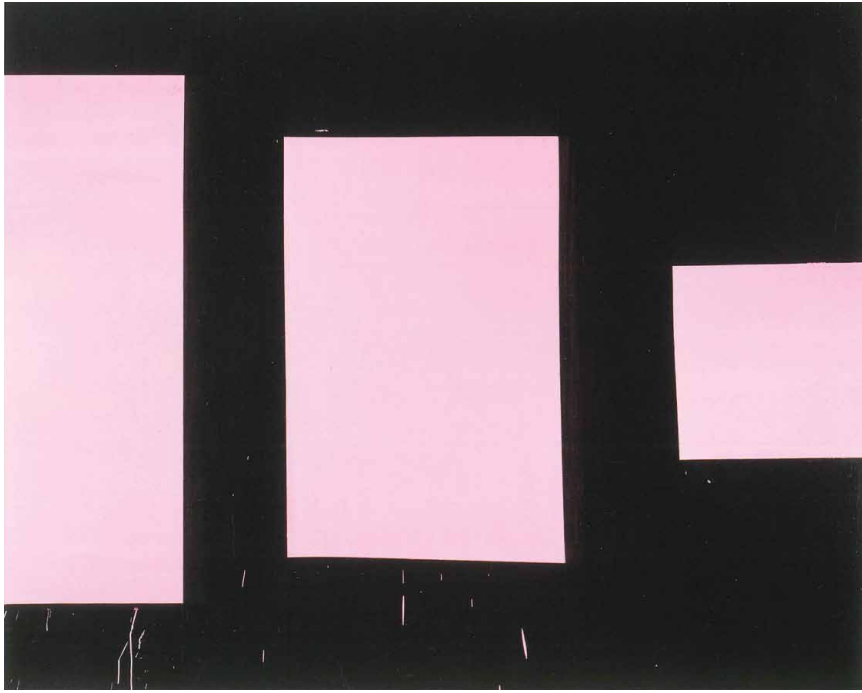
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<sup>148</sup> Terry Myers, *Mary Heilmann: Save the Last Dance for Me* (London: Afterall Books, 2007). 9

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. 12

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. 12

<sup>151</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (London/Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). 172 (First published in *Artforum*, Vol 5, June, 1967)



**Figure 12,** Mary Heilmann, *Save the Last Dance for Me*, 1979,  
acrylic on canvas, 203.2 x 254 cm



**Figure 13,** Tomma Abts, *Weet*,  
2009, acrylic and oil on canvas,  
48 x 38 cm.

It is as though one's experience of (modernist painting and sculpture) has no duration because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.<sup>152</sup> Heilmann's works subvert this concept, claims Myers, by signalling time.

Tomma Abts. commented that,

The idea of movement runs through all the works. I think that might stem from my film experiments as a student. The paintings I made then were related to my films, meaning that I was thinking of the elements in a painting as not fixed to their place on the canvas, but seeming as if they were on the move. [...] I try to keep every part of the painting engaged in some ambiguous connectedness.<sup>153</sup>

This quote suggests that as well as a stated interest in movement, Abts is also concerned with ambiguity, which may be understood as linked to the theme of doubt and uncertainty. Jan Verwoert argues that abstraction has its own "temporal latency".<sup>154</sup> Verwoert refers to a sense of allowing latent memories inscribed in the materiality of the picture to emerge when the history of the process of its mark making become tangible. He also says "The painting is finished when its possibility is realised. When the beginning becomes apparent."<sup>155</sup>

Verwoert also argues that,

You cannot own abstraction; you can only perform and experience it under the conditions and pace set by the particular nature of performance and of experience itself. It proceeds at its own particular pace and sets its own temporal parameters, has a sense of agency.<sup>156</sup>

Therefore, for Verwoert, abstraction taps into a temporal latency, in the sense that it reaches out to both that which is not yet, and that which is no longer present to the mind's eye... its content can be neither instantaneously nor ever fully actualized.<sup>157</sup> This description nicely articulates the sense of possibility, shifting perspective and movement that I experience when looking at Abts's work (in reproduction). In discussion with Abts, Verwoert also alludes to a celebration of slowness in her work which he says is radical in the current climate's "compulsive performativity", and a "just in time" environment.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 167

<sup>153</sup> Tomma Abts, "Tomma Abts in Conversation with Simon Grant," in *Painting Now: Five Contemporary Artists*, ed. Andrew Wilson (London: Tate Britain, 2013). 24

<sup>154</sup> Jan Verwoert, "Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It's a Good Idea", Glasgow School of Art <http://vimeo.com/31955412> (accessed 10 September 2014).

<sup>155</sup> Ibid

<sup>156</sup> Jan Verwoert, "The Beauty and Politics of Latency: On the Work of Tomma Abts," in *Tomma Abts* (New York: Phaidon, 2008). 92

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 93

<sup>158</sup> Tomma Abts and Jan Verwoert, "Turner Prize Artist's Talk: Tomma Abts", Tate Gallery (accessed May 5 2014).

Yet the compositions of Abts's paintings also imply movement, often containing a centrifugal aspect, or circular forms that appear like cogs or a clock mechanism. Examples are *Lubbe* (2005) or *Thiale* (2004) or *Weet* (2009) (Figure 13). On close observation, the space and shadows depicted in the paintings do not follow a rational logic. The painted shapes create an ambiguity of the space in which some objects lie on the picture plane, as well as appearing partially three dimensional. There is a sense of stillness as well as movement that activates the whole canvas. Adam Szymczyk suggests that because Abts works on her canvases over a long period of time, the paintings could be considered as events or durational pieces, in which the visible is just an upper stratum of sediments deposited on the canvas.<sup>159</sup>

## SECTION II: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE: GREENBERG, PERFORMATIVE, PROVISIONAL

### Greenberg

The work of contemporary abstract painters is often considered through the lens of Clement Greenberg's writings. Greenberg drew attention to the idea of the perception of painting as becoming increasingly conscious of itself as painting. For Greenberg, vision is of primary importance and his thinking emphasizes eyesight, the flatness of the canvas and 'opticality,' the visual effects of paint on canvas. De Keyser's, Heilmann's and Abts's work challenges this by referring to things outside of the frame of the canvas, to the history of painting and also to the ideas of Greenberg himself. These artists are using the grammar and reference point of Greenberg's thinking to do this by choosing to work with abstraction and a flat picture plane. Greenberg's influence persists, but perhaps the sharp distinction he draws between representative and abstract modes may have outlived its usefulness.

Raoul De Keyser's work is informed by many historical precedents including Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism. Traces of Paul Klee appear to inhabit his formal lexicon.<sup>160</sup> On the one hand De Keyser's paintings epitomize what Clement Greenberg labelled "homeless representation", a term he used in 1962 to indicate his irritation with the residual figuration in the paintings of Willem de Kooning and Jasper Johns.<sup>161</sup> On the other, De Keyser's paintings epitomize the ideas Greenberg espoused, using motifs such as tents and chalk lines, particularly in his early works that enable the artist to reflect on the autonomy of

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<sup>159</sup> Adam Szymczyk, "Tomma Abts," (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 2005). 3

<sup>160</sup> Steven Jacobs, *Raoul De Keyser: Retour 1964-2006* (Gent: Ludion, 2007). 59

<sup>161</sup> Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism." 125 (first published in *Art International*, 1962)

his medium. Explicitly self-reflective, painting itself is the subject of his work. Paintings of tents, where canvas is the motif are almost Impressionist images and are therefore linked to a Greenbergian interest in the autonomy and integrity of the pictorial surface.

Greenberg identified specific intentions behind every work, through which particular “problems” might find a “solution”.<sup>162</sup> This meant that every painting was assigned a position within a strictly delineated discourse that was populated by modernist terms such as reduction, unity, purity, flatness and universality. Dominic van den Boogerd argues that Heilmann, while using the tropes of the artists Greenberg championed, worked in opposition to this without the irony of some of her contemporaries.<sup>163</sup> Independent scholar Chet Domitz points out that the timing of Heilmann’s arrival in New York City in 1968 was after Greenberg’s heyday, and therefore situates the artist in New York firmly within Greenberg’s wake.<sup>164</sup> In his 2008 essay, Domitz argues that Heilmann redefines painting as performance and posits the notion that: “Mary Heilmann could be credited as a painter who found a way to inhabit the space of painting in conviviality with the specters of modernism, a conviviality that is both relaxed and deeply alert to the challenges and joys that the presence of these ghosts implies.”<sup>165</sup>

Other critics, such as Peter Plagens, place Heilmann outside Greenberg’s narrative, as a feminist who appears to feel she had to play by the rules.<sup>166</sup> Plagens initially discerned a difference in Heilmann’s work that distinguished her from many of her contemporaries. He describes this as a distance of ironic detachment: “The artist may have been doing her own thing, but she did so in response to the dominant narrative.” As such, she was still attached to it through disavowal and critique. And, according to Plagens, “gender was the fulcrum. Heilmann was the woman artist, the ‘feminist’, commenting on her more successful male counterparts.”<sup>167</sup>

According to Domitz, the distinction between Greenberg’s modernism and Heilmann’s painting is a vision/body dichotomy.<sup>168</sup> “In the former, vision is part and parcel of an

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<sup>162</sup> Dominic van den Boogerd, “Eternal Sunshine,” in *Mary Heilmann: Good Vibrations*, ed. Angelika Nollert and Paula van den Bosch (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012). 16

<sup>163</sup> Dominic van den Boogerd, “Six Misconceptions About Painting,” *Stichting De Overslag* (2005). <http://home.claranet.nl/users/overslag/00-06/Dominicvandenboogerd.htm> (accessed 4 April, 2014).

<sup>164</sup> Chet Domitz, “Mary Heilmann’s Horizon” <http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/mary-heilmanns-horizon/> (accessed October 16 2014).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Peter Plagens, “Mary Heilmann: Coloring Outside the Lines,” *Art in America* 95, no. 10 (2007). 170

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. 170

<sup>168</sup> Domitz.

austere rationalism that is actually irrational and dystopic in effect. Light, for Greenberg, is the light of transparency, which shines through everything. For Heilmann, light is the light of a summer sun, the light of appearances.”<sup>169</sup> In Heilmann’s painting, performance that is “irrational”—bodily, sensual and bacchanalian—is part and parcel of joy that masks an underlying melancholy.”<sup>170</sup> Writers who address the body in Heilmann’s work, reference her youth in California and her experiences diving under waves in the Pacific or diving off a high dive.<sup>171</sup> Heilmann herself cites her own life experiences as an influence.<sup>172</sup> Such references suggest that her art is not so much linked to vision and opticality as it is to the body and the senses.

Dan Coombs discusses the ways in which Abts’s work differs from the practices that Clement Greenberg championed, in the sense of the aesthetic ideology of formalism and aesthetic purification, where each medium would purge itself of everything deemed extraneous to its own internal logic. Coombs suggests that:

Abts works take us to a hidden place – where emotional intensity returns exactly to the places we would least expect it. In this sense she exploits exactly what Greenberg lacked, a sense of psychology. Greenberg’s blindness to the psychological component of art is precisely what makes his theories today seem so reductive, and the work of abstract artists he championed, such as Olitski, Noland and Frankenthaler, so innocently decorative. What Abts has done is to nudge painting back towards having a subject, or more precisely, into being a subject.<sup>173</sup>

In Abts’s paintings, as in the work of Heilmann, there is a relationship to the body. In her work portraiture is indicated by the dimensions of the canvas. Giving the paintings ‘names’ albeit obscure, and making the paintings dimensions portrait scale, indicates that the artist seems to be ascribing a ‘personality’ to each painting. The more intimate nature of Abts’s work is also referred to by Jan Verwoert who discusses Abts in relationship to the artists Greenberg championed. He states, “By developing her language of processuality out of minute reversals and irregularities, Abts defies the ostentatious theatricality of Abstract Expressionism’s grand gestures.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Johanna Burton, “Mountain Wave: Mary Heilmann’s “Mary Heilmann Phase”,” in *Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone* (California: Orange County Museum). For example. 45-87

<sup>172</sup> Mary Heilmann, “The All Night Movie,” in *Mary Heilmann: Good Vibrations*, ed. Angelika Nollert and Paula van den Bosch (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012). 179-199

<sup>173</sup> Dan Coombs, “Tomma Abts,” *Turps Banana*, no. 10, October (2011). 63

<sup>174</sup> Verwoert, “The Beauty and Politics of Latency: On the Work of Tomma Abts.”

### Provisional Painting

Raphael Rubinstein discusses De Keyser and Heilmann's work amongst other artists in terms of the rubric 'Provisional Painting'. These are artists who make work that looks "casual, dashed off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling."<sup>175</sup> Rubinstein suggests that provisional painting is major painting masquerading as minor painting. He describes a genealogy for such practice that includes the artists Cezanne and Giacometti. He claims that the history of modernism is full of strategies of refusal and acts of negation. He quotes Paul Valery, who wrote that a poem is "never finished, only abandoned," or Artaud's call for "no more masterpieces."<sup>176</sup> Provisional painting is the "finished product disguised as a preliminary stage, or a body double standing in for a star/masterpiece whose value would put a stop to artistic risk."<sup>177</sup> Mary Heilmann's work is described as provisional by Rubinstein, because she favours the "slightly wobbly over the straight and true," she has an "unflashy way of handling paint," and has little sense of program or agenda. Because she began as a ceramicist her painting is positioned as ceramics by other means.<sup>178</sup>

Making a comparison with the positioning of the writing of Franz Kafka, termed 'minor' by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari because (as a Czech Jewish author) he wrote in German, Rubinstein says that faced with painting's imposing history and the diminishment of the medium by newer art forms, recent painters may have found themselves in similarly 'minor' situations: "Their work is an index of the impossibility of painting and the equally persistent impossibility of not painting."<sup>179</sup>

Raoul De Keyser's work is a prime example of 'Provisional Painting' for Rubinstein. His paintings have the appearance of being dashed off. A sense of indeterminacy in De Keyser's work – hesitations, mistakes and corrections – are visible in the paintings. He allows chance elements to play a critical role in the work's genesis, ensuring that the stages of a given painting's construction remain visible in the finished piece. Their compositional balance is fragile. He engages in an investigation of what critic Hans Rudolf Reust has called "nonfigurative narration" – a silent sequence of painterly events, and his work seems to constantly generate new possibilities for itself and for the artist.<sup>180</sup> A series of paintings by De Keyser is often no more than a group of works sharing a certain affinity. As Michael

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<sup>175</sup> Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting." 123

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. 123

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. 134

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. 126

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. 134-135

<sup>180</sup> Michael Wilson, "How to Read Contemporary Art," (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013). 212



Wilson points out: “its implicit concerns with fragility, dissolution and impermanence align it with much recent art and writing.”<sup>181</sup>

A comparable argument is posed by Jan Verwoerht in a lecture “Why are conceptual artists painting again? Because they think it’s a good idea,” presented at the Glasgow School of Art in 2010. He cites Mary Heilmann as an example of an artist who is “neither post-modern nor late modernist but one who continues modernism – in a lower key.”<sup>182</sup> He states that Heilmann is an artist who lives up to the challenges of modernism – the grid as an invocation of a ‘final solution’ to pictorial rationality. Painting is not a question of taste but something to develop in the making. To quote Verwoerht: “there is no way to win the game, just to play the game.”<sup>183</sup> Heilmann’s painting fits the ‘provisional’ moniker with its loose, brushy, roughly painted surfaces. The inconclusiveness of her work generates the feeling that it could endlessly mutate.

Abts’s work, being meticulously painted although it is small, ‘minor’ in scale, does not have the appearance of the dashed-off or the ‘provisional’ that Rubinstein talks about. There is however an element of contingency in the painting process. Adrian Searle discusses Abts’s work as being in a constant flux and reflux of certainty and doubt. “Whenever you think the painting is giving you something concrete, it takes it back, reverses itself, turns itself inside out”.<sup>184</sup> Searle also points out that the smallest details carry weight, as does the colour. Underlying layers peek through, revealing faint patterns and isolated lines.

What at first sight seems a readable, reasonable, comprehensible compositional logic turns out to be irrational, subjective and arbitrary. It is as if to say: you can begin a painting anywhere, and where it ends will be somewhere else; something happens along the way.<sup>185</sup>

Searle also points out that the untimeliness, uncanniness and homelessness of Abts’s paintings contribute to the feeling of the provisional in that they are unplaceable, fitting neither into a movement nor a recognisable historical moment. “Whatever a painter does leads in several directions at once: backwards, forwards, sideways. Is that the central metaphor here?”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid. 212

<sup>182</sup> Verwoert, “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It’s a Good Idea”.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Adrian Searle, “Is Anyone There?”, Guardian News and Media <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2005/dec/13/3> (accessed 13 April 2014).

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

The idea of the provisional may be linked to that of the performative. And the artists' use of the performative indicates the ways in which they extend or innovate on the traditions of Modernism. The performative aspect of their practice may be seen as evidence of how they continue to explore the issues of abstraction in painting.

### Performative Painting

Performativity could be seen as unsettling the sharp distinction between representative and abstract modes of painting. The term performative was first used in linguistics. To perform is to make something happen. The philosopher J.L Austin argued that all language can be seen as performative. Judith Butler applied these ideas to gender identity. These theories explore the ways that social reality is not a given but is continually created as an illusion "through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign."<sup>187</sup> As with language, painting may also be regarded as performative.

It can be claimed that Mary Heilmann is performing abstraction. Her paintings are immediately recognizable as 'Heilmann's', however she cites influences from music, pop culture and fine art. Her abstractions riff on basic elements of modernist painting: the grid, the monochrome, stripes, organic forms, linear webs, spots, checks and drips. She references art movements such as cubist geometry, surrealist biomorphism, abstract expressionist gesture, colour-field stripes, Ellsworth Kelly's shapes, and other familiar conventions. She often brings together two such 'samples' in a painting. Unlike the work of abstract painters who became prominent in the 1980s, her painting is not ironic. Elizabeth Armstrong, who organized *To Be Someone*, Heilmann's 2008 museum retrospective states: "Heilmann's pictures seemed to be about something (abstract painting?), but it was unclear what that was."<sup>188</sup> This sense of a lack of irony is also emphasized by Martin Prinzhorn who calls Mary Heilmann a "postmodernist- affirming modernism". He says her paintings do not call for the end of history but continue to write a different, non-evolutionary story that takes pleasure in playing and mixing, constructed in an interstitial place that embraces formal yet flexible situations in painting.<sup>189</sup> Heilmann is part of a generation of painters who are finding a bridge between the conceptual, deconstructive abstraction of the late 1960s and 1970s and a larger painting history.

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<sup>187</sup> Dino Felluga, "Modules on Butler: On Performativity" <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/English/theory/genderandsex/modules/butlerperformativity.html> (accessed April 16 2015).

<sup>188</sup> Armstrong, 24

<sup>189</sup> Martin Prinzhorn, "Images as the Symptoms of Painting: The Antitotalitarianism of Mary Heilmann," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 5, no. 1 (2002). 51

Terry R. Myers discusses a performative aspect to Heilmann's paintings. Regarding the painting *Save the Last Dance for Me* (1979), he observes: "There's a very good chance that it's a picture in modernist *drag*, dancing—and *passing*—as if it was somehow in the nightclub and on the (white) wall at the same time."<sup>190</sup> Having training in ceramics and sculpture and then turning to painting, Myers also notes that "throughout the 70s Heilmann self-consciously performed painting as if it still were sculpture, all the while recognizing that the angle from which she was approaching it had attitude."<sup>191</sup> He also suggests another aspect of Heilmann's performative approach to painting is the way in which the work remains formally rigorous, yet open to wild stretches of the imagination – fantasies that are generated from what may seem the most unlikely of sources; ceramics.<sup>192</sup>

In an essay titled "Mary Heilmann's Horizon", Chet Domitz discusses her work in terms of performance and of theatricality. He says that its childlike appearance seems to lack gravitas, and belies the fact that the work is highly intelligent, appearing to be something other than what it is. He also points out that Heilmann's description of her work as expressing joy but also melancholy indicates that one of these emotions must be a performance.<sup>193</sup>

Abts's paintings can also be discussed in relation to performance. Because she destabilises the logic of geometrical structures by her use of small displacements the seemingly rigid shapes and patterns begin to drift apart. She also allows them to reconfigure themselves in unpredictable constellations. By performatively unworking structures in the process of working on them, Abts reveals their latencies and thereby deconstructs their organisation from the inside out.<sup>194</sup> The form is gradually pulled apart, fanned out, torqued, twisted and splayed until the initial image comes to life and fades away at the same time. Abts's shapes appear to fold and unfold on the surface of the canvas. The painting becomes somewhat like a performance when the viewer begins to question what is an edge, line, space or object.

### **Performative painting: Installation**

While De Keyser's, Heilmann's and Abts's practice is creating paintings, their attention to the context in which they are exhibited could be seen as 'installation', and therefore has a performative aspect. In this regard there is also a connection to the ideas put forward in Michael Fried's essay *Art and Objecthood*, which outlined a demarcation between

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<sup>190</sup> Myers. 49

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. 52

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. 52-53

<sup>193</sup> Domitz.

<sup>194</sup> "Yes, No & Other", S1 Artspace <http://www.s1artspace.org/programme/yes-no-other-options-art-sheffield-08/>.



**Figure 14,** Mary Heilmann, *All Tomorrow's Parties*, 2003. Installation view Secession, Vienna

autonomous art (which Fried argued could trigger absorption,) and objects in context that became, in his terms, art in the presence of the viewer through a reliance on theatricality.<sup>195</sup> As Niamh Ann Kelly points out in her essay “Here and Now: Art, Trickery, Installation”, Fried’s text was intended as a criticism of minimalist sculpture, but remains significant in relation to discussion about how artists have challenged the field of representation.<sup>196</sup>

Heilmann herself has said:

Each time I do a show, or am in a group show, I think of it as one installation piece. I think of the people who come to see the work as part of a picture, part of a story. My paintings and sculptures can be seen as representations of thoughts and ideas. I like to scan my eyes around the room and read the show like a storyboard. And I hope my visitors do that too.<sup>197</sup>

To achieve this, in recent years Heilmann includes chairs of her own design as part of her installations so that people would stay longer (see Figure 14). These chairs are made of plywood with colourful webbing and are on castors so that they can be wheeled around the gallery by the viewers. The artist is not concerned about an isolated work that stands for

<sup>195</sup> Fried. 148-172

<sup>196</sup> Niamh Ann Kelly, “Here and Now: Art, Trickery, Installation”, Irish Museum of Modern Art [http://www.imma.ie/en/page\\_212542.htm](http://www.imma.ie/en/page_212542.htm) (accessed 15 April 2015).

<sup>197</sup> Mary Heilmann, “Mary Heilmann Visions, Waves and Roads”, Hauser & Worth <http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/1170/mary-heilmann-visions-waves-and-roads/view/> (accessed April 16 2014). (Quoting Artist’s Statement for the Whitechapel Gallery, 2009).

itself in the monumental sense of abstract modernism. Her works always relate to people, and their dimensions alone prevent any kind of monumentalism.<sup>198</sup>

Tomma Abts also conceives of her exhibitions as installations, with deliberate installation strategies which involve paintings being hung quite low, with a substantial distance between the placement of individual works.<sup>199</sup> David Rhodes points out: “When installing the exhibition Abts looks for a precise relation for her works to the gallery. The position and height of the works and the lighting are, in a way, the continuation of the idea of composition, this time applied to the gallery itself.”<sup>200</sup> As noted on the occasion of Abts’s installation for the Turner Prize exhibition at the Tate Modern: “while each work develops within its own parameters, hung together in the gallery one is aware of formal and tonal relationships between canvases, reflecting the way Abts works on many at once, allowing ideas to migrate from one to another.”<sup>201</sup>

### SECTION III: CONNECTIONS TO MY PRACTICE

The ideas about the grid discussed above are reflected in my own painting practice through geometric shapes that are hand drawn, outlined and blurred, and appear to float across the picture plane. Examples are *Green Geo* (Figure 73) and *Sunset Painting* (Figure 34).

Movement is also referenced in my work and is an important element in the process. Works created in 2009 and 2010 for the exhibition *Away... Towards* such as *Green Eggs and Ham* (Figure 26) and *White Wavy Painting* (Figure 21) provide examples. The paint was applied in a loose grid or linear format across the surface thus forming a substructure. My practice is to subsequently use an acrylic scraper to move and blend the paint in an improvisational activity inspired and prompted by music. The movement of the scraper leaves a trace of the process giving the works a rhythmic, oscillating appearance. The paint is scraped in a linear manner from end to end, although wavering and moving up and down along the way. This process emphasizes the materiality of the paint that is pulled forward in advance of the scraper. The thickness of paint varies according to the pressure applied in the process.

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<sup>198</sup> Angelika Nollert and Paula Van den Bosch, *Mary Heilmann: Good Vibrations* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012). In forward page 7

<sup>199</sup> Suzanne Hudson, “Reading Tomma Abts,” *Parkett* 84, (2008). 22

<sup>200</sup> David Rhodes, “Real Spaces and Illusions of Depth: Tomma Abts at David Zwirner,” *artcritical* (2014). <http://www.artcritical.com/2014/10/25/david-rhodes-on-tomma-abts/>.

<sup>201</sup> Tomma Abts, “Turner Prize 2006 Artists: Tomma Abts”, Tate <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/turner-prize-2006/turner-prize-2006-artists-tomma-abts> (accessed 15 April 2015).

Several series of my own work have been produced at different times, by recycling paint remaining on the scraper after the completion of an earlier painting. These works on paper such as *Untitled 1–8* (Figures 44–51), transparent and opaque acrylic such as *Red* (Figure 40) and *Venice* (Figure 43) represent a reprise for the paint in a different role. The varying pigments of oil paint have been mixed and blended on the scraper in serendipitous combinations akin to a marbling process, so my agency is twice removed in these works. There is a sense of movement, as they are a direct trace of the pass of the scraper over the surface. Some might even find a digital appearance to these works.

While working towards an exhibition my method is to amass a body of work from which to select paintings for hanging. For me the manner of their installation is important, and I hope that connections between the works become apparent to the audience. In this way I attempt to provide a sense of the experimentation and processes that occur in the studio.

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The discussion of these three artists sheds light upon the position of abstract painting today. It became apparent that the influence and legacy of Greenberg's criticism is still present in current discussions and practices of abstract painting. These artists' bodies of work question the notion of the importance of an 'avant-garde', vital to Greenberg who made pronouncements about what was cutting edge, new and passé. Their work has provided a platform to further discussion about the poetic, focusing on the idea of making and the consideration the performative nature of their practice. While none of the elements of their work is 'original', what they make out of these elements is. As painter Peter Doig remarks in conversation with Abts, comparing a 1969 review of the Stooges album by Lenny Kaye to contemporary art, the parts are not original but "any formal criteria becomes basically irrelevant in the face of what is happening..." The Stooges, whose chords were the same as Rolling Stones', created something else. Tomma Abts responds that: "as with music, everything is available to painting... it sets it free for more personal visions or states of mind."<sup>202</sup> These artists may be considered late Modernist by those who remain faithful to the medium of painting, however at the same time they use painting in a performative way.

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<sup>202</sup> Tomma Abts and Peter Doig, "Painting in the Real World," *The Wrong Times* 1, (2004).

Common threads that run through the practice of these artists are the use of modest scale and traditional painting materials. Their work does not attempt grand or heroic statements. It is not ironic but has a sense of playfulness and humour. The use of pattern with geometric shapes in organic ways is also part of each of their practices. De Keyser's oeuvre is an exploration of the materiality of paint and canvas, working with themes that are close at hand and that come out of the history of his own studio practice and immediate environment. Heilmann has also worked with materiality and bold colours, using a myriad of influences to create, her dynamic compositions. Abts develops a language of processuality out of minute reversals and irregularities.

The artists discussed in this chapter appear to have arrived at their way of working through the reconsideration of the work of their abstract artistic predecessors. The ways in which these artists have titled their work is of interest and ties the work to things in the world whether musical, pop culture, first names, or the natural environment. An artist whose work is visually connected to this type of painting, sharing many formal qualities but that has arrived via a very different route will be considered in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Gesture

This chapter will extend upon my discussion of abstract art through a discussion of the paintings of Indigenous Australian Alhalkere artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye (c1910–1996). Her work fits in visually and thematically with the artists I have discussed previously but the work comes from an entirely different cultural context. I am interested in the formal aspects of her work, her use of colour, line and what appears as abstraction to a non-indigenous, non Alkherre viewer. Connections and comparisons can be drawn between elements in Kngwarreye's work and the key themes addressed in the previous chapter – the poetic, doubt, provisionality and the performative. An examination of her work also provides an alternative perspective on notions of musicality, pattern, colour, line and the organic. Critical discussion surrounding contemporary Indigenous art is also brought into the discussion. Part of the appeal of recent Indigenous Australian art to a Western audience has been its seeming visual affinity with modernist and 'postmodern' practices. I examine this as well as the Eurocentrism inherent in this reading that is at odds with the perceptions of the artists who create the work.

Emily Kngwarreye is an Eastern Anmatyerre speaker and was born at Alhalkere (Soakage Bore), about 230 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs. This is the place that was the foundation of her life and beliefs, and governed her kinship relations. It was also the source of her paintings. In the 1920s the lands of the Anmatyerre and Alyawarr peoples, including Kngwarreye's country, were settled by European pastoralists and named Utopia. Kngwarreye and her husband worked on pastoral properties and she also worked with camel teams. In the late 1970s she was a founding member of the Utopia women's Batik Group. In 1979 Kngwarreye and other women demonstrated the powerful nature of art as evidence for showing connection to country, which resulted in the Anmatyerre and Alyawarr people gaining freehold title to Utopia under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* of 1976. In 1988–89 she commenced painting with acrylic on canvas. It is estimated that she produced more than 3000 works (an average of one per day) in the eight years she painted, until her death in 1996.

The painting movement that Kngwarreye was a part of commenced in 1971 at Papunya settlement 240 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs when Geoffrey Bardon, an art teacher, encouraged a group of men to paint a mural on a school wall. Subsequently in 1972 they began making acrylic paintings on board for a Western market, forming the



company Papunya Tula. The paintings of this group are characterised by delicate intricate dot work that employed particular iconography such as concentric circles and semi circles for seated persons and animal or human tracks motifs. In the Eastern Kimberley region Rover Thomas began making individual paintings in the 1980s using traditional pigments. His work combined large expanses of flat ochre with linear or dotted line work. The Warlayirti Artists movement commenced at Balgo, in north Western Australia in 1981 with the painting of church banners by senior men. In 1984 women joined this movement and it became known for its diversity of style and bold use of colour. Subsequently many other Indigenous Australian communities have developed their own painting styles. Emily Kngwarreye's canvases have a freer flowing format with a substructure of looped lines and veils of dots. I have chosen to focus upon her painting for this study because of the loose dynamic nature and diversity of her work, and exciting visual appeal.

The paintings of Emily Kngwarreye are indisputably based on Altyerr (Dreaming/Law).<sup>203</sup> Nevertheless, in making her work available to a viewing public wider than her immediate community, the work is also a form of cross-cultural communication. My interest in the work stems primarily from an interest in Kngwarreye's practice – but I am also drawn to the larger cultural significance that can be associated with her paintings, without seeking or hoping to be able to resolve the tension between the perspectives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Nor can I ignore the fact that, as a non-Indigenous artist, my insights and perspective can only be limited. My personal experience of living with the Indigenous community of Haasts Bluff as a teenager for eight months has also informed my appreciation of Kngwarreye's work and its cultural context.

Gesture is a term often associated with American abstract expressionist artists, and discussed in Jungian terms as an expression of the subconscious and partially inspired by non-Western art forms. This practice was championed by Clement Greenberg in the 1940s in relation to artists like Jackson Pollock, as well as Willem de Kooning. Greenberg viewed gestural painting as avant-garde and hailed such practice as a break with the tradition of easel painting, and an extension upon the surrealist practice of automatic drawing.<sup>204</sup> Gesture is also discussed by linguist Jennifer Green in relation to Central Australian Indigenous sand drawings, a traditional cultural practice that informs the contemporary art-making

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<sup>203</sup> Jennifer Green, "The Enigma of Emily Kngwarreye", National Gallery of Australia <http://nga.gov.au/dreaming/Index.cfm?Refnc=Ch6> (accessed April 29 2015).

<sup>204</sup> Greenberg, "The Jackson Pollock Market Soars." 112, originally published, *New York Times Magazine*, 1961.

of many Indigenous Australians.<sup>205</sup> Unlike the painted marks of the abstract expressionists, the gestures of artists such as Emily Kngwarreye are loaded with subtle, specific meaning, and as such are a particular mode of communication.<sup>206</sup> A discussion of Kngwarreye's use of gesture and mark-making is the main focus in this chapter. But first some comments about the difficulties of 'reading' Indigenous art in a western context will be addressed.

## SECTION I: CRITICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

Here I address some general ideas about the current critical perspective on Indigenous Australian art. I consider Greenberg's ideas. The philosophical background to Kngwarreye's work I consider is her cultural belief system. I also discuss ideas of the poetic, movement and the performative.

### Critical context: In relation to Modernist ideas

Art historian and curator Henry Skerritt writes that the ascendancy in the art world of Australian Indigenous artwork in the 1980s was due to the perceived exhaustion of modernism and that such work provided a way for Modernist painting to continue.<sup>207</sup> He makes high claims for Australian Indigenous art both political and aesthetic.

Aboriginal art stands at the vanguard of contemporary art: it is able to express the coequality of difference, while maintaining its own identity; to show the coexistence of multiple ways of being in the present; and to reveal the connective fibres of relation that make the contemporary world comprehensible. Aboriginal art shows us what it means to live in a world of accelerating multiplicity – literally, what it means to be *contemporary*.<sup>208</sup>

Art historian Roger Benjamin describes Emily Kngwarreye as "a new Modernist hero" in that her work conformed to the type of "all-over painting" defined by Greenberg in American formalist criticism of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>209</sup>

In writing about the history of Central Australian Indigenous art, Ian McLean says that the imagery has an autonomy and power that is very similar to that claimed by Western

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<sup>205</sup> Jennifer Green, *Drawn from the Ground: Sound, Sign and Inscription in Central Australian Sand Stories* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. (see chapter "Lines in the Sand" 100-165)

<sup>207</sup> Henry F. Skerritt, "Letter from Pittsburgh: Aboriginal Art in America", Graham Meadowcroft <http://artguide.com.au/articles-page/show/letter-from-pittsburgh-aboriginal-art-in-america/> (accessed December 10 2014).

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Roger Benjamin, "A New Modernist Hero," in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Albalkere: Paintings from Utopia*, ed. Margo Neale (South Brisbane Queensland Art Gallery, 1998). 47

Modernism for fine art and, in his opinion, is the site of translation between the two cultures.<sup>210</sup> He also comments that greater ‘abstraction’ by the artists such as Kngwarreye, meant that for certain Western audiences the art came to be seen as increasingly modernist and thus a desirable commodity for a Western market.<sup>211</sup> As mentioned above, there are affinities between European ‘abstraction’ and Australian Indigenous art practice. Artwork produced by Indigenous Australians is evolving, and signature styles and subjects can be attributed to individual artists.

Current discussion by both art historians such as Ian McLean and anthropologists lament the lack of critical depth in discussion about contemporary Indigenous art, for example John Carty in his 2013 article “The Limits of Criticism”.<sup>212</sup> Critical discourse about Indigenous painting practice has generally referred to biographical anecdote or to the ‘stories’ that the work represents. The writers are generally non Indigenous and certainly non Alhalkere. Whether or not there is value in assigning Western cultural preoccupations and perspectives to Indigenous art, it is important to try as far as possible to understand and acknowledge the specific cultural context of the work of particular artists, in this case, Kngwarreye. In doing so I am also able to find valuable insights and challenges which provide perspective on my own work.

### Altyerr/Dreaming

While extremely reluctant to talk about her work, at least in English, Emily Kngwarreye’s most definitive statement about its meaning has been “it’s whole lot [...]”, “[...] Whole lot, that’s whole lot, Awelye (my dreaming), Arlatyeye (pencil yam, kerrthe (mountain devil lizard), Ntange (grass seed), Tingu (a Dream-time pup), Ankerre (emu), Intekwe (a favourite food of emus, a small plant), Atnwerle (green bean), and Kame (yam seed). That’s what I paint: whole lot [...]”<sup>213</sup> This is a list of most of the individual living elements that relate to Alhalkere (country). She does not begin to allude to the complex inter-relationships between the elements. “Whole lot” means it is about the body of knowledge, rather than its unique parts, such as stories of ancestral beings and their activities.

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<sup>210</sup> Ian McLean, “Contemporary Perspectives: Balgo Futures,” in *Warlayirti: The Art of Balgo*, ed. Jacqueline Healy (RMIT Gallery, 2014).78

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. 78

<sup>212</sup> John Carty, “The Limits of Criticism,” *Artlink* 33, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>213</sup> Margo Neale, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere: Paintings from Utopia* (South Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1998). frontise page, and repeated frequently in the publication as it is Kngwarreye’s most definitive statement about her work.

Kngwarreye's aboriginal name, *Kame*, which was given to her by her father, means yam seed. Barbara Weir, Kngwarreye's adopted daughter, recalls in conversation with Victoria King, that,

She always painted the same thing, it was about the yam. She painted the yam roots and she painted the yam flowers after the rain. And the seeds of the yam and the body paint of the yam. 'cause I know, 'cause she was speaking language to me all the time and I know the story, and it's all to do with the yam. When it's ready to flower, it lifts the ground and then that's how it comes up. With growth, like any other thing growing, the flower comes on as the leaves come, but with *atnwelarr* (yam), it's different, it just comes up and the flower comes right up from it. And that's how she draws the roots 'cause the roots were underneath the ground and lifts the ground up. And a lot of that was about dirt, too, when she did the wildflower. The dirt was all mixed up in it, too. And the way it used to flower and the earth and the roots. She did kame, yam seeds, the yam itself and also did this special food for emu, a special little seed in the tree.<sup>214</sup>

Linguist Jennifer Green who has worked with Indigenous communities in Central Australia for thirty years has attempted a definition of Altyerr, the Arandic word for 'Dreaming' which is at the centre of both popular and academic understandings of Aboriginal art and culture.

It has a complex range of meanings, some religious, signifying a range of notions including law, spirit or soul as well as ideas about the creation or the manifestation of different forms of life in ancestral country. Altyerr and the complex ontological worlds that they signify are an important part of social constructions that are 'continually in the making'. The term also extends to mean certain types of 'story', in particular those pertaining to country and creation. The 'continuous potential for transformation', the blurring of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction and the potential for humans to coexist simultaneously in their human and totemic forms is one of the keys to understanding Altyerr as an overarching creative principle in which stories are situated in a continuous temporal frame, which includes the past, the present and the future.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Barbara Weir, "Aunty Emily and Painting," in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: The Person and Her Paintings*, ed. Anne Runhardt (Adelaide: Dacou, 2009), 65

<sup>215</sup> Green, *Drawn from the Ground: Sound, Sign and Inscription in Central Australian Sand Stories*, 43-44.

As a forceful personality, senior member of her community and leader in traditional matters, Kngwarreye's confidence in the power of her art to communicate appeared strong. Her paintings function not as narratives but as direct communication. They can look like little seeds or roots of plants, or vast landscapes – but they can also be viewed as completely abstract works that transcend such literal readings. The individual paintings relate to different aspects of ceremony – but their inter relationship means each one points to the entirety. Whether comprised of fields of dumpy dots, elegant black lines, raw slashed stripes or a field of fine dots veiling secret marks, Kngwarreye's descriptive response was always the same: "[...] it's whole lot, everything" Every painting, as is the case for many desert artists, regardless of stylistic differences – is about one story – her 'country' and the *Altyerr*. Every painting is in essence the same painting, and akin to different parts of a song cycle.

### Poetic

As with the work of Klee discussed in Chapter One, Kngwarreye's paintings may be discussed in terms of poesis in that they represent a continuing and renewal of the world, and a reconciliation of thought with matter and time. They may also be seen as poetic works. Green cites independent curator and consultant on Indigenous Australian art Wally Caruana who stated that the:

[...] interpretation of Aboriginal design and images is not a one-to-one equivalence. Rather, like poetry with all its inherent complexities, multiple references and intended ambiguities, each symbol or icon in a work may encapsulate a variety of meanings.<sup>216</sup>

The paintings are also poetic in nature, as they are linked to song poetry to 'creation'.<sup>217</sup>

The practice of the sand story tradition can also be seen as poetic and gives some context for contemporary Indigenous Australian art practices. As Green describes it, Central Australian sand drawings incorporate speech, song, sign, gesture and drawing. It is a dynamic practice. A narrative is built up, conjuring real and imagined spaces through successive drawing and erasure of marks in the sand accompanied by variously intonated speech, singing and gesture. Acrylic paintings on canvas are a more permanent record of such gesture. Anthropological linguist David Wilkins in a personal communication cited by Green, suggests that: "like poetry is founded on the subversion of standard everyday

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<sup>216</sup> Green, *Drawn from the Ground: Sound, Sign and Inscription in Central Australian Sand Stories*. 232

<sup>217</sup> Ibid. 4

language practice, so Central Australian 'sacred' art is founded on the subversion of everyday narrative and conversational sand drawing practices."<sup>218</sup> Kngwarreye's paintings seem to be a poetic interpretation of 'sacred' practices. Drawing in the sand which is linked to paintings on canvas may be viewed as a performative practice. Events are described and re-enacted. Here I discuss the performative aspect of Kngwarreye's practice.

### **Movement/Performative**

McLean suggests that there was a desire for work that was performative at the time when Australian Indigenous art was being taken up by a European audience. He points out that: "buoyed by the radical ideas that percolated in the 1960s and '70s a younger generation of artists and critics sought out more performative and visceral modes of art production, to which Aboriginal art seemed a perfect fit."<sup>219</sup> Hence part of the appeal of Kngwarreye's paintings may relate to their performative element. As King points out: "As a respected elder and senior Law woman Kngwarreye had taught generations of Utopia women *alwlye*, the ceremonial women's dances and songs that re-animate and rejuvenate the land and its custodians."<sup>220</sup> She goes on to say that during the last years of her life Kngwarreye re-created body-painting marks onto canvases, and one can sense the movements of women dancing. The dots and lines made in acrylic on canvas are not background or infill but the re-creation of her country through the physically rejuvenating gestures of her own body. The intentional repetition within her paintings is a fundamental aspect of her culture. "The meaning is held within performance, an affirmation of custodianship and deep connections between person and country."<sup>221</sup>

The traditional stories involve movement of ancestral beings across and forming the landscape. So it seems fitting that Kngwarreye's paintings have a strong sense of dynamism and movement. As Green has outlined, these stories have a rhythm and fluidity to them. One of the striking features of sand drawing is the apparent ease and fluidity with which narrators draw, as if they are effortlessly sculpting the earth.

The drawing is not heavily considered or laboured over: it is executed rapidly and with a light touch. A variety of hand shapes are used. Individuation or precision are achieved by varying the shape of the hand.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid. 233

<sup>219</sup> Ian McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Contemporary Art* (Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011). 45-46

<sup>220</sup> Victoria King, "Country, Continuity and Custodianship: The Life and Paintings of Emily Kame Kngwarreye," in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: The Person and Her Paintings*, ed. Anne Runhardt (Adelaide: Dacou, 2009). 13

<sup>221</sup> Ibid. 14

<sup>222</sup> Green, *Drawn from the Ground: Sound, Sign and Inscription in Central Australian Sand Stories*. 55-56

Green notes that:

Sticks and wires are used as storytelling implements. As props to provide rhythmic accompaniment to the stories, used to mete out punishments to imaginary characters and to beat or stab the ground for various rhetorical purposes.<sup>223</sup>

Canadian cultural theorist and philosopher Erin Manning in her book *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* writes, “Kngwarreye’s paintings do not call forth the Dreamings, they dance them”.<sup>224</sup> In discussing the series of six panels, *Untitled 1995*, she notes that the paint activity draws the background into the foreground, creating a direct perception of the activity, of relation felt through the “heavy, impatient line.” In this series the colours range from white to red to yellow, creating a pink-orange-brown-blue-greenness emergent from mixing the paint. There is a sense of paint exhausting itself (and the canvas) by the end of the series. Manning describes the lines as being materialised from the range accessible from shoulder to hand in a single movement that never dissociates the shoulder from the body.<sup>225</sup> A sense of energy comes through in these works, an energy of composition. Manning cites the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead to describe the sense of the ‘eventness’ of the work. She describes Kngwarreye’s activity as one of ‘worlding’, where “the world within experience is identical with the world beyond experience, the occasion of experience is within the world, and the world is within the occasion.”<sup>226</sup>

Manning also discusses Emily Kngwarreye’s *Utopia Panels 1996* (Figure 15). These are not simply straight lines, she writes:

The lines breathe, dancing not only their duration but the perishing of their process” [...] Lines dance into one another such that the movement of the paintbrush, moving across the canvases, can almost be felt. There is a sense of effort here, but with it comes also a sense of speed. [...] There is not time to return to the line: the line must draw the movement. The gesture itself must become line. One pass with the paint, and that’s all. Move the canvas. The result: a vastness of localized movement.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.53

<sup>224</sup> Erin Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*, Technologies of Lived Abstraction (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009),178

<sup>225</sup> Ibid. 175

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. 178

<sup>227</sup> Ibid. 175

To watch Kngwarreye paint (on video) is to have a sense of her dancing while painting.<sup>228</sup> For me, this reflection by Manning is a wonderful evocation of the connection between the creation of the paintings and their creator.

Art historian Terry Smith evocatively describes Kngwarreye's way of painting. He discusses her practices in terms of the notion of the making of the painting which converges with its subject matter, (body and land being the same) and its visual outcome also being the same thing.<sup>229</sup> Informed by videos and comments by observers of her technique of painting, he argues that for Kngwarreye the process of painting and the composition and figuration of the painting itself are the same. Elements in the painting *Desert Storm* (1992) are interpreted and described by Smith.

Storm clouds gathering, converging in the sky above the desert, rain falling onto rock and sand to run towards a river, the soakage bore swelling up and out, wild flowers bursting into bloom – each is of these is pictured but only by her acts of reaching out and pulling back, pounding as she goes [...] her body reaches in, her arms stretch across space, a woman drawing her country with her body's reach, imprinting her sacred body marking on it and then bringing it back to her body. Fluidity of movement gives the painting structure; it exists only as a result of the artist's body's movements traced as paint.<sup>230</sup>

## SECTION II: WORKING PRACTICE

### From Batik to Canvas

Emily Kngwarreye's lifetime of mark-making for ceremonial and cultural purposes was the foundation of her paintings for a non-Indigenous audience. Kngwarreye commenced producing artwork using European materials as part of a collective group of women working at Utopia making batik, in about 1977.<sup>231</sup> The nature of this work suited all-over patterning. The process of applying wax, dyeing, then boiling the fabric before applying another layer of wax and repeating the process did not seem to suit her temperament.

I did batik at first, and then after doing that I learned more and more and then I changed over to painting for good...Then it was canvas. I gave up on...fabric to avoid all the boiling to get the wax out. I got a bit lazy – I gave it up because it was

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid. 181

<sup>229</sup> Terry Smith, "Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter," in *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings* (Craftsman House, 1998). 32

<sup>230</sup> Ibid 32

<sup>231</sup> Julia Murray, "Drawn Together: The Utopia Batik Phenomenon," in *Across the Desert: Aboriginal Batik from Central Australia*, ed. Judith Ryan (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2008). 119



too much hard work. I finally got sick of it...I didn't want to continue with the hard work batik required – boiling the fabric over and over, lighting fires, and using up all the soap powder, over and over. That's why I gave up batik and changed over to canvas – it was easier. My eyesight deteriorated as I got older, and because of that I gave up batik on silk – it was better for me to just paint.<sup>232</sup>

Kngwarreye was given a small board as part of a community painting project at Utopia, *A Summer Project*, organised by Rodney Gooch in 1988-89 in which approximately one hundred boards were distributed amongst members of the community. Kngwarreye's board, amongst others, generated excitement.<sup>233</sup> This was the commencement of her acrylic painting on canvas 'career'.

### Development of 'abstraction'

Works depicting parallel lines, such as the series Utopia Panels 1996 (Figure 15), are a direct reference to body painting, as is the early work Awelye of 1990 (Figure 16), which incorporates the imagery of breasts including the marks delineated upon them. Looking at these two examples we can see the increasing 'abstraction' in her work. This may reflect confidence in the power of her marks to convey its importance.

### Working Methods

#### *Brush*

Descriptions of Kngwarreye's working method are evocative. Barbara Weir, who acted as cook and also mixed up paints recalled: "She alternated hands in a single painting, first her left hand, then the right. Her left hand was the strongest."<sup>234</sup> The brush became a natural extension of her arm, increasing the reach of her body. It was a tool to be used and adapted according to her and the painting's needs. Weir describes Kngwarreye trimming her brushes to suit her purposes. The bristles played the painted surface like the fingers of a hand. She often clutched the handle of the brush close to the bristles and used her whole body to drive the paint-laden brush in arcs or lines as far as her arm would extend – only stopping when out of reach, or paint – whichever came first.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Jennifer Green, "Holding the Country: Art from Utopia and the Sandover," in *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal Art in Australia*, ed. Hettie Perkins (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007). 205

<sup>233</sup> Anne Marie Brody, "Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Portrait from the Outside," in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere: Paintings from Utopia*, ed. Margo Neale (South Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1998). 17-18

<sup>234</sup> Victoria King, "Earth's Creation," in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: The Person and Her Paintings*, ed. Anne Runhardt (Adelaide: Dacou, 2009). 134

<sup>235</sup> King, "Country, Continuity and Custodianship: The Life and Paintings of Emily Kame Kngwarreye." 12

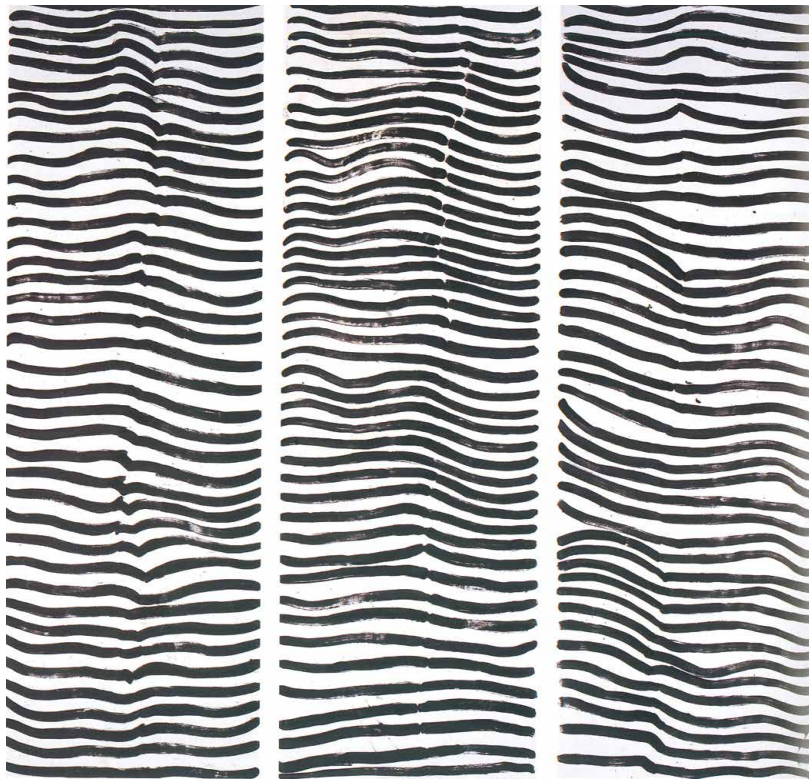


Figure 15, Emily Kngwarreye, *Utopia Panels*, 1996 (3 of 18), synthetic polymer paint on canvas, each 280 x 100 cm. (Collection of Queensland Art Gallery)



Figure 16, Emily Kngwarreye, *Awelye*, 1989, synthetic polymer on composition board, 30.1 x 45 cm. (Collection National Gallery of Victoria)

## ***Colour***

Donald and Janet Holt were important supporters of Kngwarreye. The Holts' cattle station *Delmore Downs* was situated near Kngwarreye's family's camp and, according to Janet Holt, their homestead was a place she came to camp and paint as a respite from the harsher circumstances of her own camp.<sup>236</sup> In a wonderful anecdote Janet Holt relates: "When I showed Emily a Matisse brand colour chart from which to order paint she dragged her fingers upturned across the chart, paused, then said, whole lot!"<sup>237</sup> Kngwarreye had a preference for red and yellow mixed with white, sometimes with one more colour. Janet Holt also notes that Kngwarreye's colour palette reflected seasonal changes.<sup>238</sup> In 1994 Kngwarreye painted four major large-scale works titled *Earth's Creation. Earth's Creation II* (Figure 17) incorporates turquoise greens that signify the wet season. A profusion of wild flowers bloom, use of white relates to the seed of the atnwelarr/yam and yellow to flowers of the ground covering yam plant. Dots of rich reds echo the red sand and the ochres and browns evoke the long dry season.<sup>239</sup>

Kngwarreye was open to innovation as well as being attuned to the reception her work received. She sometimes painted in particular styles or scale to order.<sup>240</sup> Awareness that her previous innovations had been well received may have provided confidence to innovate further. For example James Mollison, director of the National Gallery of Victoria, purchased the first painting Kngwarreye made using bright colours. Bright red acrylic provided from the school painting material supply was used because the natural ochre had run out.<sup>241</sup> The circumstances and chance occurrences that led to innovation, and then a return to previous methods of painting, and Kngwarreye's openness to these situations is inspiring.

## ***Dotting***

Kngwarreye's initial method of making paintings 1989–1991 utilised many dots of varying sizes and colours, sometimes lying over each other. In creating the dotted paintings which make up two thirds of her oeuvre, she worked with a couple of colours on the brush simultaneously, dipping her brush into one pot of colour and then another. Direct frontal

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<sup>236</sup> Janet Holt, "Emily Kngwarreye at Delmore Downs 1989-1996," in *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998). 155-156

<sup>237</sup> Ibid. 151

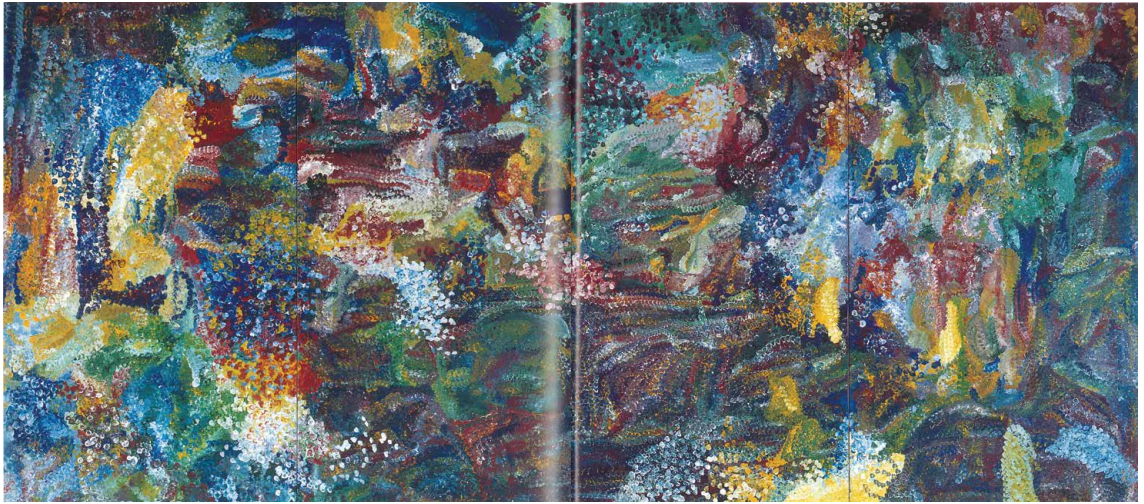
<sup>238</sup> Ibid. 152-153

<sup>239</sup> King, "Earth's Creation." 134

<sup>240</sup> Holt. 154

<sup>241</sup> Ibid. 151





**Figure 17**, Emily Kngwarreye, *Untitled (Earth's Creation)*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 4 panels, 3 x 275 x 160 cm, 1 x 275 x 160 cm. (Collection Dacou Gallery)



**Figure 18**, Emily Kngwarreye, *Alwelye*, 1989/90, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 128 x 166 cm. (The Holmes à Court Collection)

application and rapid thrust with which she dumped the paint onto the surface meant the colours often did not run but retained their clarity. The brush splayed with the dramatic force of her action, hollowing out at the centre and feathering its edges to create on the canvas a petrified impression of its strands. Dubbed the ‘dump-dump’ style, this technique is sometimes varied with a twirling of the brush to create a dynamic ‘pom-pom’ shape. According to Weir, as mentioned, these dotted paintings represent the yam flowers, which sprout directly out of the earth in an unusual fashion.<sup>242</sup> After rainfall the desert is covered in wild flowers, of stunning colour – bright pinks, lemon yellows, and carmines, which contrast spectacularly with the red sand and blue skies. The fields of dots on her canvases convey an aerial impression of clusters of ephemeral wild flowers and the heat shimmer of the Alhalkere country.

Janet Holt’s description of Kngwarreye’s approach to painting a large canvas is both interesting and evocative. Kngwarreye worked upon the section of a canvas that was within arm’s reach from her seated position on the ground before it, covering an arc on the section of canvas that was before her, and then moving it along to work on a neighbouring section. This method is evident when looking at large canvases such as *State of my Country* 1990, or *Emu All Over*, 1990.<sup>243</sup> A series of arcs loop around the periphery of the canvas, with a hollow in the middle. But these arcs also coalesce into a mass – a field of shimmering dots. Susan McCulloch has pointed out that the strength of Kngwarreye’s arms and hands made strong through years of work with camels and horses and digging for yam, was particularly evident in her ‘dump-dump dot’ works. She would use a large brush to pound the canvas in an action McCulloch likens to the pulverizing of garlic with a mortar and pestle.<sup>244</sup>

### ***Dot to Line***

A number of paintings from 1992 and 1993 consist of dots which form trails or lines and merge into fields of colour, and are more ‘painterly’. The colour palette in these works is subdued because more heavily mixed by a brush dumped on the canvas multiple times without being refreshed. *After Rain Summer*, 1993 (Figure 19) in the Holt Collection is a wonderful symphonic example. The title indicates that it is a time of growth and flowering of desert plants. Yellow bands of dumps run along next to muted olive greens reminiscent of mulga or casuarina foliage of the desert. There is a red well near the centre and red band at the bottom.

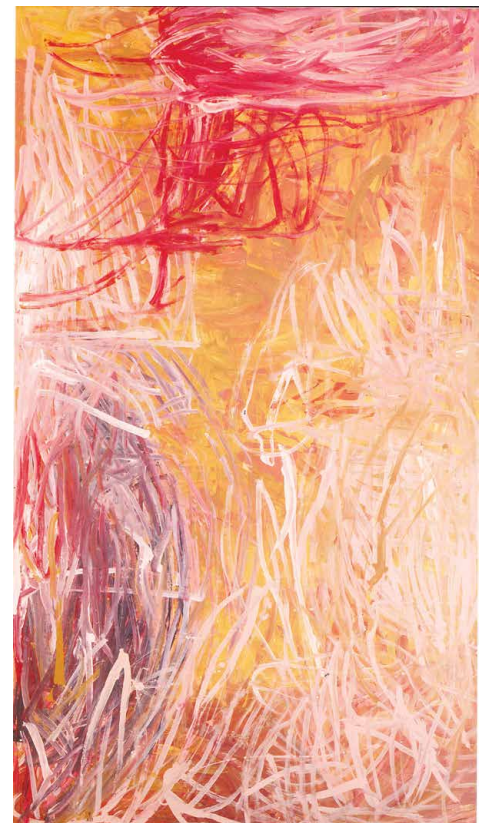
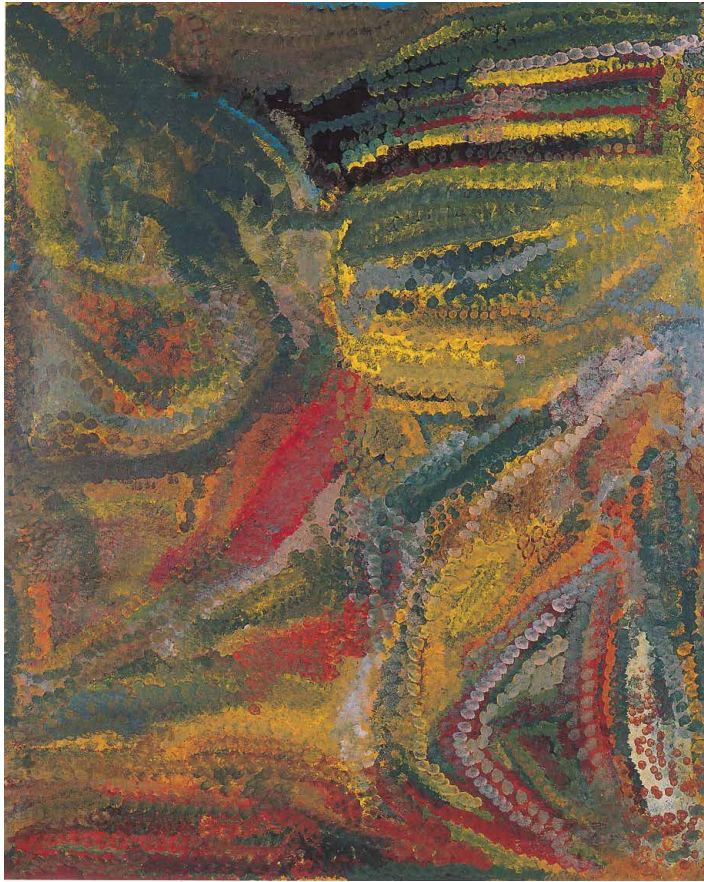
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<sup>242</sup> Victoria King, “Wild Flowers,” in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: The Person and Her Paintings*, ed. Anne Runhardt (Adelaide: Dacou, 2009). 92

<sup>243</sup> Part of Holt collection

<sup>244</sup> Susan McCulloch, “A New Way of Seeing: Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s Significance in Australian Art,” in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: The Person and Her Paintings* (Melbourne: Dacou, 2009). 18





The red is tempered by a grey mauve which is overlaid upon it in parts. On the bottom right is a small patch of white with a sprinkling of red dots over it. The painting looks topographic, seeming to define undulations. It also seems to follow the contours of the yam with a central area from which lines curve outwards, which could represent roots. Noticeable are arcs that are formed in the composition, two distinct ones on the right and one on the upper left, with the bottom left corner more of a furrow, and at the top a more constrained and muted arc partially appearing. Overall it has a great sense of poetry and the relationships between the colours and forms have a wonderful sense of rhythm and movement.

### ***Linear***

The linear paintings form two groups. The organic looping or scribbly lines are representative of the root system of the yam. In some of former group Kngwarreye covers the substructure of these root like lines with fields of dots, so that the lines are almost covered, however often they seem to form a structure or grid or subtle delineation upon which the dots are arranged. In others the lines are visible, forming a mesh of varying tones and colours that cover the field of the canvas.

In a video recording of Kngwarreye at work on *Big Yam Dreaming* 1992, described by Smith, we are given an insight into her technique.<sup>245</sup> She worked steadily over two days along the length of an enormous (291 x 801.8 cm) black canvas with white lines. Her tendency was to lay down one stroke, then bring back another stroke towards it, and a third stroke connecting the two, dipping the brush into the can of paint for each stroke. Most of the markings were made by the artist working from a seated position, reaching in front of her making short curving sweeps, connecting one tendril line with another. There is no effort to generate a repeating pattern. In keeping with the rhizomatic meandering of yam roots and tendrils, the spread of lines is random. Often she would connect them by painting over a spilled dot; at other times she seemed to echo a larger shape by adding smaller curves.<sup>246</sup>

The linear scribbly works of 1995–1996 (of which Figure 20 is an example) is made up of frenzied looking lines that appear to have been applied at great speed in order to complete the canvas or cover it as quickly as possible. White is the dominant colour, with yellow, red

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<sup>245</sup> Smith. 36-37

<sup>246</sup> Ibid. 36

and blue over a black background. The lines in this painting are applied in fairly straight gestures, some are arced but they do not curve around as in earlier yam paintings. Perhaps these frenzied lines are used to quickly cover something secret. To the viewer of this painting there is an immediate sense of the artist at work.

The other types of linear paintings are more geometric, minimal, contain parallel lines and are derived from body painting. An example of this style is *Utopia Panels* 1996, (see Figure 15), which take the form of series of paintings based on horizontal and vertical lines. These paintings are a translation of ceremonial body painting to a series of panels that have human dimensions and appear pared back and minimal. The human gesture is evident in that one can see where the artist has paused the sweep of the brush, come to the end of her reach, rested and continued on. Sometimes she seems to have covered multiple canvases or boards with a single sweep.

### ***Broad brush***

In August 1996, not long before her death, Kngwarreye completed twenty four canvases over three successive days using a wide priming brush. These works represent another innovation and display of inventiveness in Kngwarreye's work. It is reported that as there were no others available she virtually grabbed the brush from the assistant even before the paint pots were thoroughly mixed – and started covering the canvases with unfaltering ease.<sup>247</sup> The surfaces are minimal and the brush strokes form broad blocks of tone and colour. Kngwarreye used hot pink, orange, turquoise blue, olive green, beige and white. She referred to these works as 'my country'<sup>248</sup> and they demonstrate assuredness, control, energy, colour and strong, gestural mark making.

## **SECTION III: CONNECTION TO MY PRACTICE**

These interpretations of the performative and poetic quality that is central to Kngwarreye's work resonate for me with a sensation I identify with when creating paintings to particular musical accompaniment. Paintings such as *Kaleidoscopic* (Figure 27), *Yellow Red Blue* (Figure 24) and *A Journey* (Figure 22), combine colour combinations scraped and manipulated in response to music. The works I hope convey a visual sense of rhythm and the performative aspect of their creation.

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<sup>247</sup> Victoria King, "Final Series," in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: The Person and Her Paintings*, ed. Anne Runhardt (Adelaide: Dacau, 2009), 166

<sup>248</sup> Ibid. 166



My work comes together at the end of the making process in the blending and homogenising of the paint and its final placement on the support. There is a sense of excitement when the paint applied to the surface of the Perspex blends in fortuitous ways, combining to create something poetic from previously discrete areas of different coloured paint.

For me, both the all-encompassing cultural thinking that is the foundation for Kngwarreye's artwork, and the innovative ways that it manifested in her paintings is inspirational. Kngwarreye's approach to the canvas, use of colour, brushwork and variety of mark making, which differ from those used by artists schooled in Western traditions, is also of interest. While Kngwarreye's paintings are rooted in her particular world view, the themes correspond with my own interests. In looking at her work I have also been influenced by some of the formal elements. This has included experimenting with earth-coloured pigments and gestural line work, for example paintings of 2011 *Graffiti Painting* (Figure 56), *Yellow Grey Red* (Figure 57) and *Scarlet Scarlet* (Figure 61). The gesture in these works becomes the subject. Hollowed out in the centre due to the pressure of the brush on the support, this hollow is then filled with alternative colours when I drag the scraper across the surface, filling the indentations with alternative coloured pigments, emphasizing the texture that the brush has created.

In making abstract works I am also concerned with conveying a sensation or feeling and have difficulty titling my work. The title is usually applied for the purposes of an exhibition. Those who handled Kngwarreye's work for sale have tended to choose titles that allude to Western concepts of landscape or narrative. Examples are *Desert Storm* 1992, *After Rain Summer*, 1993, *Winter Abstraction* 1993, *Wild Yam*, *Utopia Panels*. This issue raises interesting questions about the work and the perceptions that may be suggested by a title, as well as the untranslatable nature of the meaning of these works.

\* \* \* \* \*

In this chapter I have attempted to provide an alternative perspective upon the themes developed previously. I have reflected upon the sense of the poetic, the performative, movement, rhythm, colour, gesture and mark-making that are manifest in the paintings of Emily Kngwarreye. Curator Judith Ryan commented that even when Kngwarreye was working with batik she stood alone because her batik generally does not narrate

‘stories’ or create pictures of the seen world but grapples with its essence in an Abstract Expressionist sense.<sup>249</sup> Her oeuvre maintains its organic freedom, with its anchor in lines and dots. Kngwarreye tackled changes in medium, format, scale and concept, yet she always maintained her artistic vision, and has left a strong cultural and artistic legacy that is relevant not only to Australia’s Indigenous people but also to those schooled in broader Western traditions.

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<sup>249</sup> Judith Ryan, “In the Beginning Is My End’: The Singular Art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye,” in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere: Paintings from Utopia*, ed. Margo Neale (South Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1998). 39

## CONCLUSION

In this exegesis I have sought to provide a context for my own work by tracing the thinking that has informed the practice of abstract painters over the past century. I have considered the ideas, works and painting practices of Paul Klee, Willem de Kooning, Raoul De Keyser, Mary Heilmann, Tomma Abts and Emily Kngwarreye in terms of the poetic, doubtful, provisional, performative and gestural. Discussed in relation to these themes these selected artists have offered fruitful material and inspiration for the exploration and re-examination of ideas I have worked with for many years.

Throughout the exegesis I have also considered theoretical and critical perspectives on artistic practice, in particular those of a key writer in relation to abstract painting. I believe Clement Greenberg's 1960 statement that "the essence of modernism lies in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence,"<sup>250</sup> remains relevant to thinking about artwork produced today. Greenberg's influence and his propositions (although at times contradictory) continue to resonate today. His emphasis on the flatness of the canvas, whether the work is abstract or representational, and his insistence on judging art not by what is said about it but by looking at it,<sup>251</sup> is evident in the work of the artists I have examined as well as fundamental to my own practice.

Reflecting again on the trajectory of the research undertaken both in my practice and in the composition of this exegesis, I continue to be captured and challenged by the works and artists I have studied. I appreciated the multi-layered and dynamic nature of Klee's work as well as its economy and simplicity. Studying his art practice provided a foundation for the examination of ways in which the material elements of an artwork are evocative. De Kooning's exploration of methods and materials, with his constant doubt, questioning and reinvention, provided fertile ground to study the notions of doubt and gesture. In both of these artists I found precedents for my contention that these themes are inherent in abstract and semi abstract painting.

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<sup>250</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).85

<sup>251</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). 138

The more recent works of De Keyser, Heilmann and Abts appear to share concerns that are close to my own. Their tendencies to avoid grand gestures and also to engage with past genres with innovative results have been reaffirming. The paintings of Emily Kngwarreye provided an alternative perspective upon what is abstraction, the poetic, doubt and the performative. The dynamic nature of her engagement with the materials of paint and canvas in a gestural language demonstrated innovative ways to work with fundamental formal elements.

The development of my work over the course of this research has been an investigation of basic painted forms that I have revisited at different times. I have used the painted dot or circle and painted line in various ways. Earlier work used linear patterns to create oscillating forms. Others were more freely gestural. Lines and dots were revisited in a graphic form. In all of these works I engaged with the materiality of oil paint and the surface of the support. In the studio I have explored the potentiality of colour and organic form applied to Perspex (acrylic sheet). This activity inevitably involves an artistic practice that is open-ended, improvisational and poetic.

By looking at other artists and key themes that characterise their work, I have understood that my own painting practice intuitively incorporates the poetic, the provisional and the performative as well as doubt and gesture. Through the process of research and writing I have found that the poetic (with its emphasis on 'making' above 'meaning') doubt and the provisional (or the notion of hesitation reflected and not necessarily 'resolved' in the placement of a mark on the surface) and the performative and gestural (with their emphasis on the act and dynamic movement of the work in progress) are essential aspects of how I approach painting. My response in the studio combines an interest in pattern, the natural world, response to music, the flatness of the painting support and the potential of colour and movement. I have also found that painting does not exhaust the possibilities of these themes and concerns, but continually generates and gestures towards new possibilities.

## ANNA WHITE IMAGES

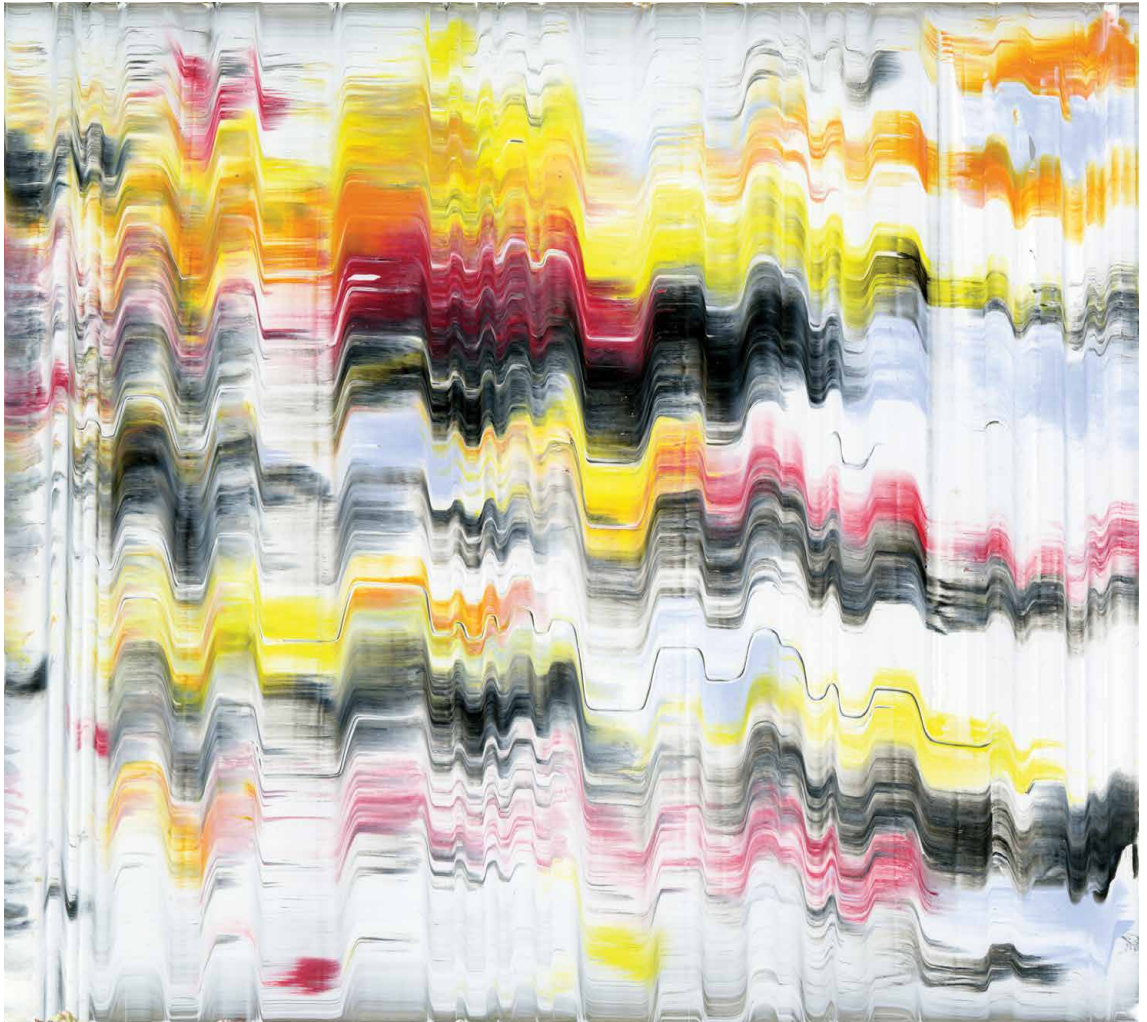


Figure 21, Anna White, *White Wavy Painting*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 24 x 27 cm



Figure 22, Anna White, *A journey*, 2009,  
oil on perspex, 15.5 x 36 cm



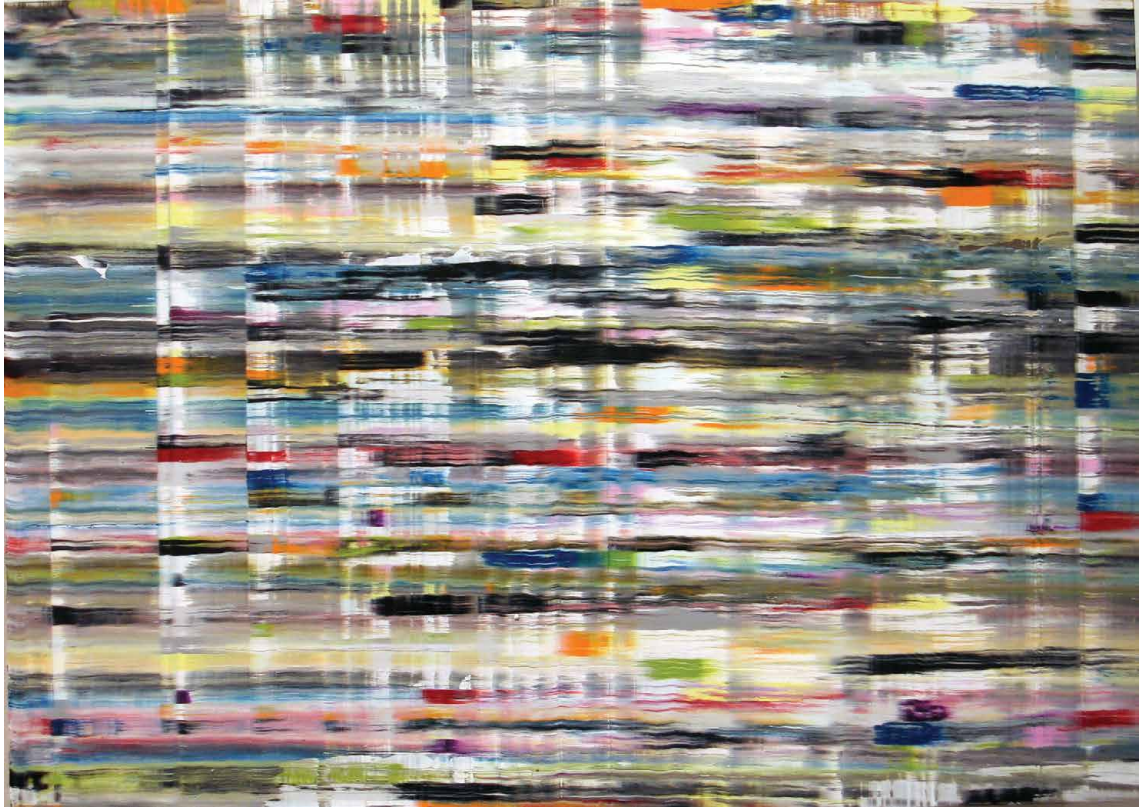
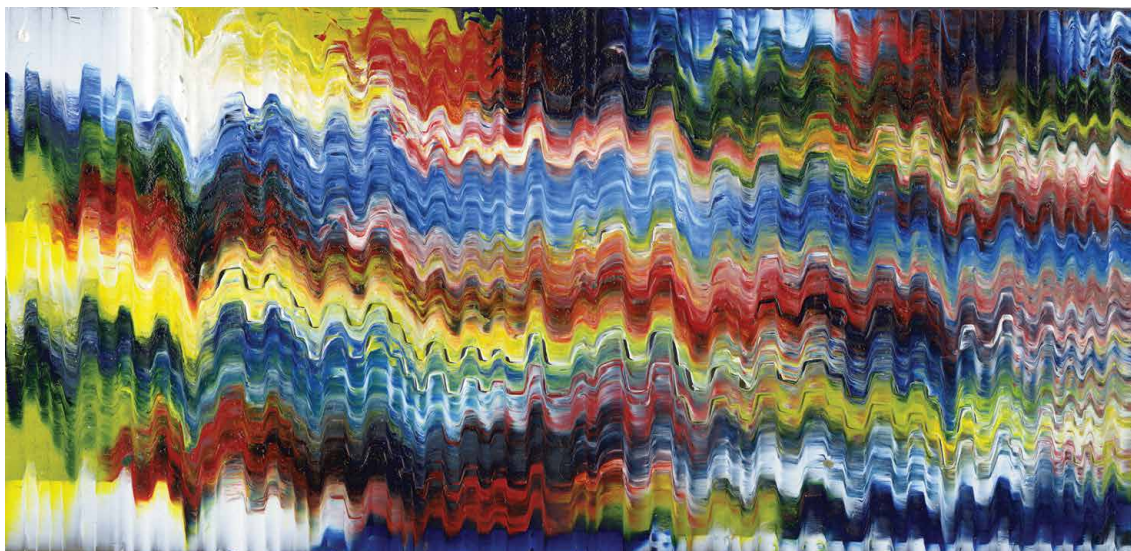


Figure 23, Anna White, *Away-Towards*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 45 x 60 cm



**Figure 24,** Anna White, *Yellow Red Blue*, 2009,  
oil on perspex, 16.5 x 40 cm



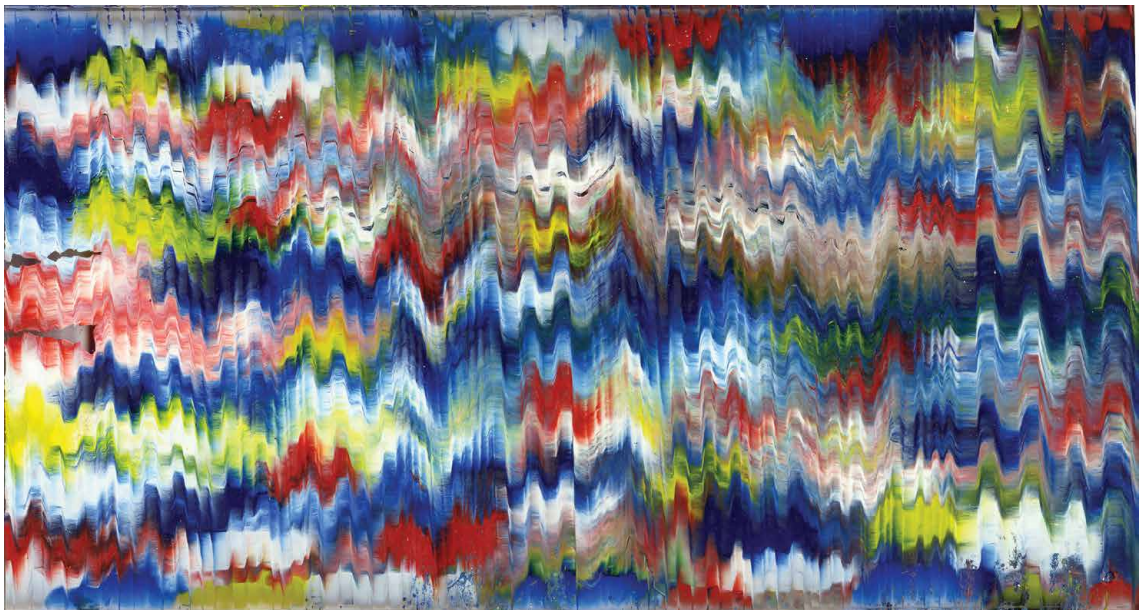


Figure 25, Anna White, *Blue Red Yellow*, 2009,  
oil on perspex, 16.5 x 30.5 cm

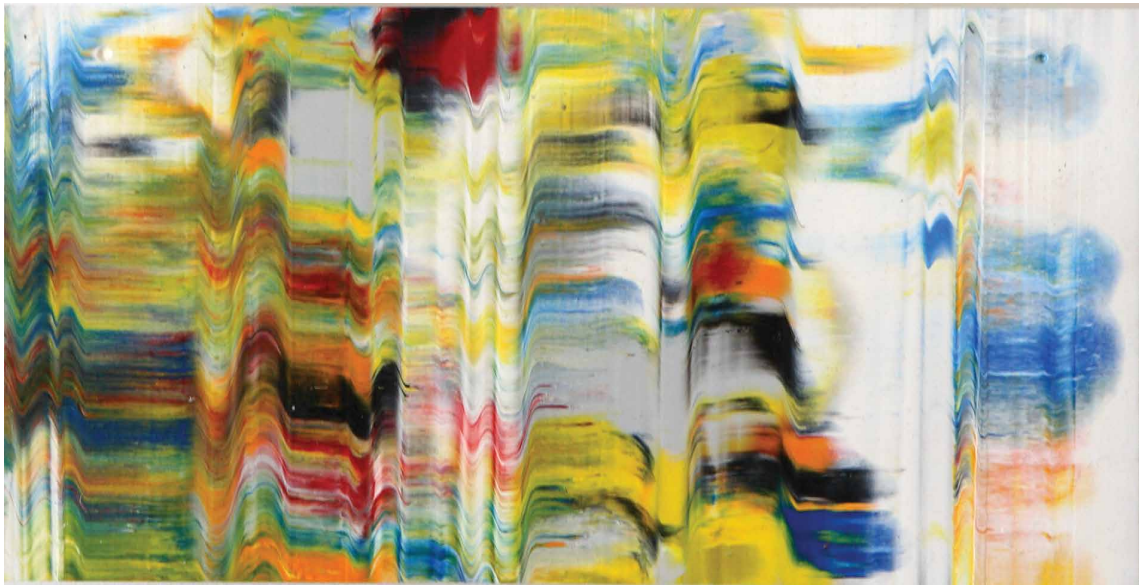
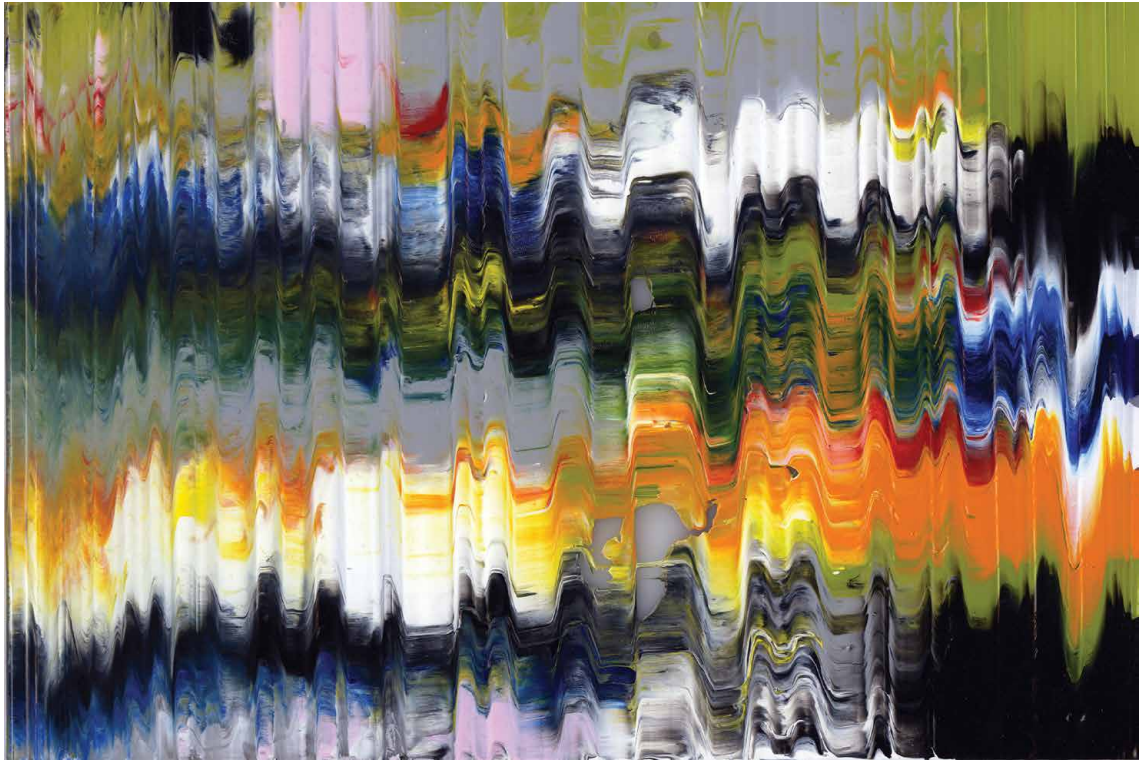


Figure 26, Anna White, *Green Eggs and Ham*, 2009,  
oil on perspex, 15.5 x 30.5 cm



**Figure 27,** Anna White, *Kaleidoscopic*, 2009,  
oil on perspex, 27 x 41 cm



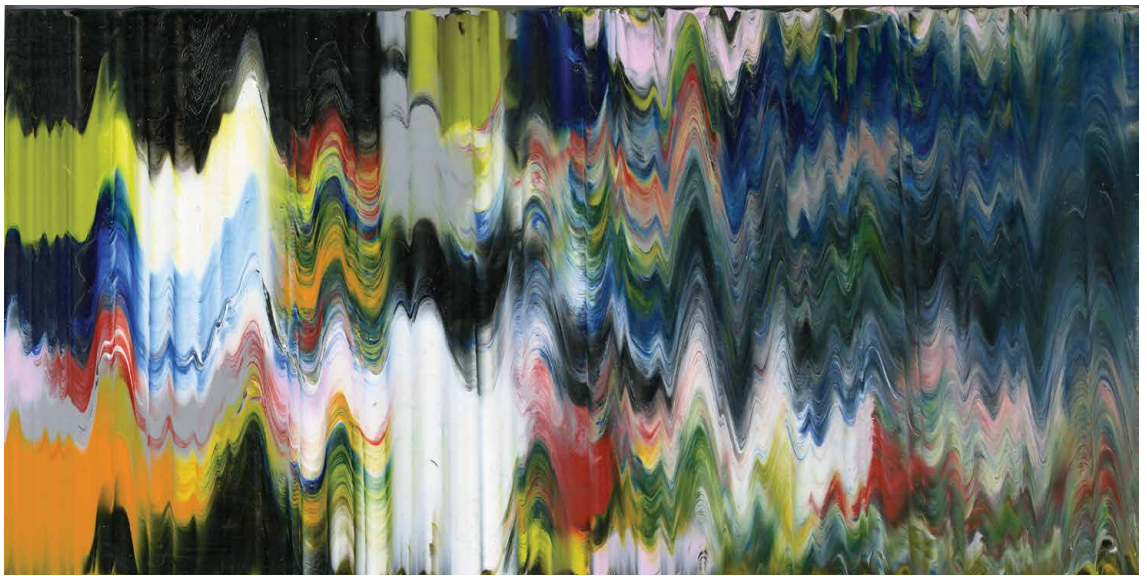


Figure 28, Anna White, *Kaleidoscopic 2*, 2009,  
oil on perspex, 16.5 x 32.5 cm



Figure 29, Anna White, *35 mph*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 21 x 60.5 cm

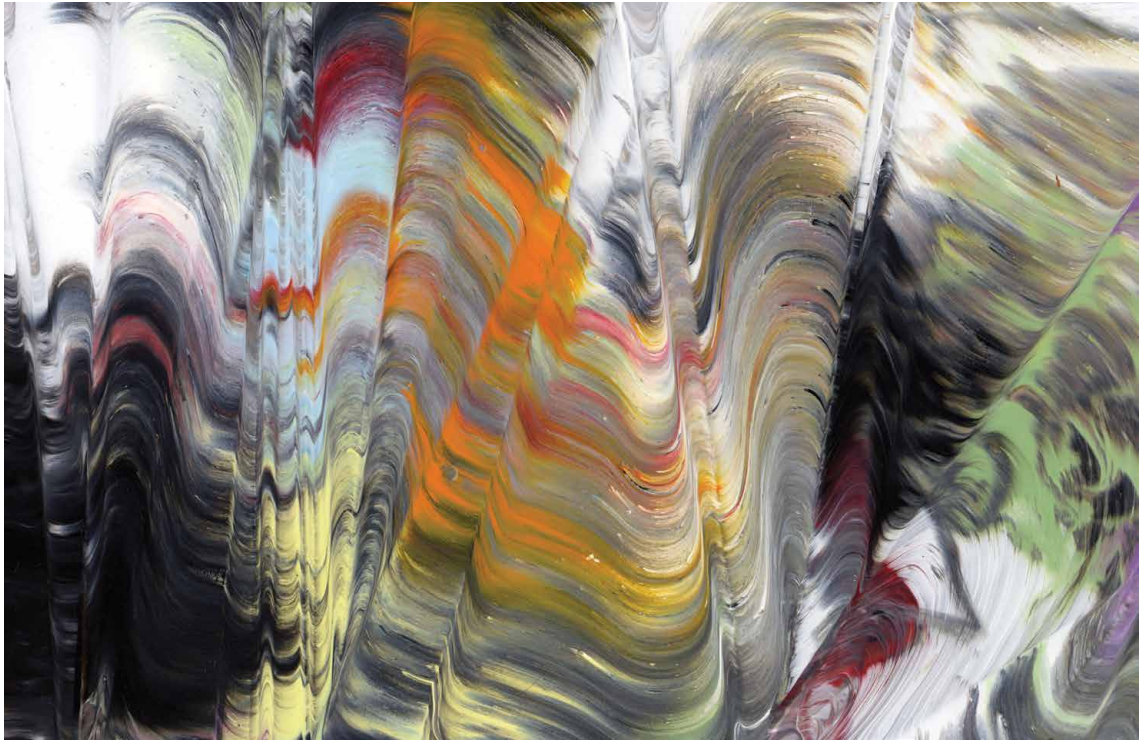


Figure 30, Anna White, *Fold*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 24 x 37 cm



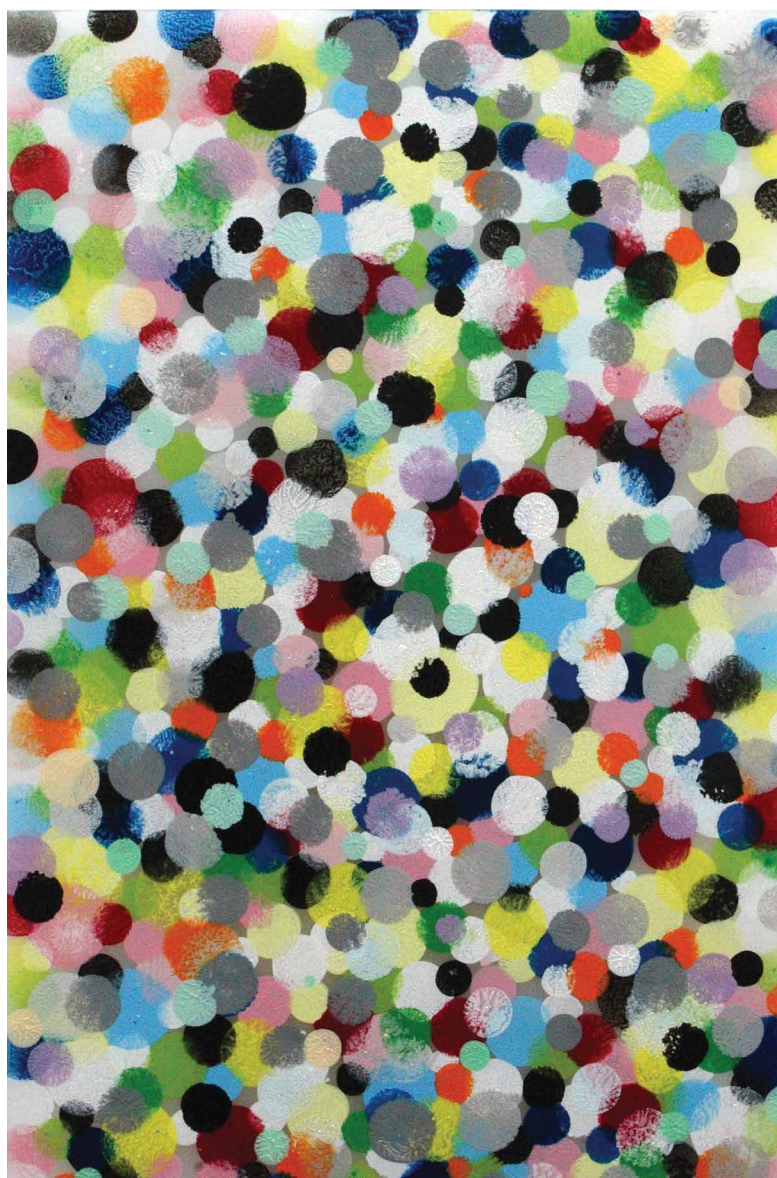


Figure 31, Anna White, *Dot Painting*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 81.5 x 54 cm

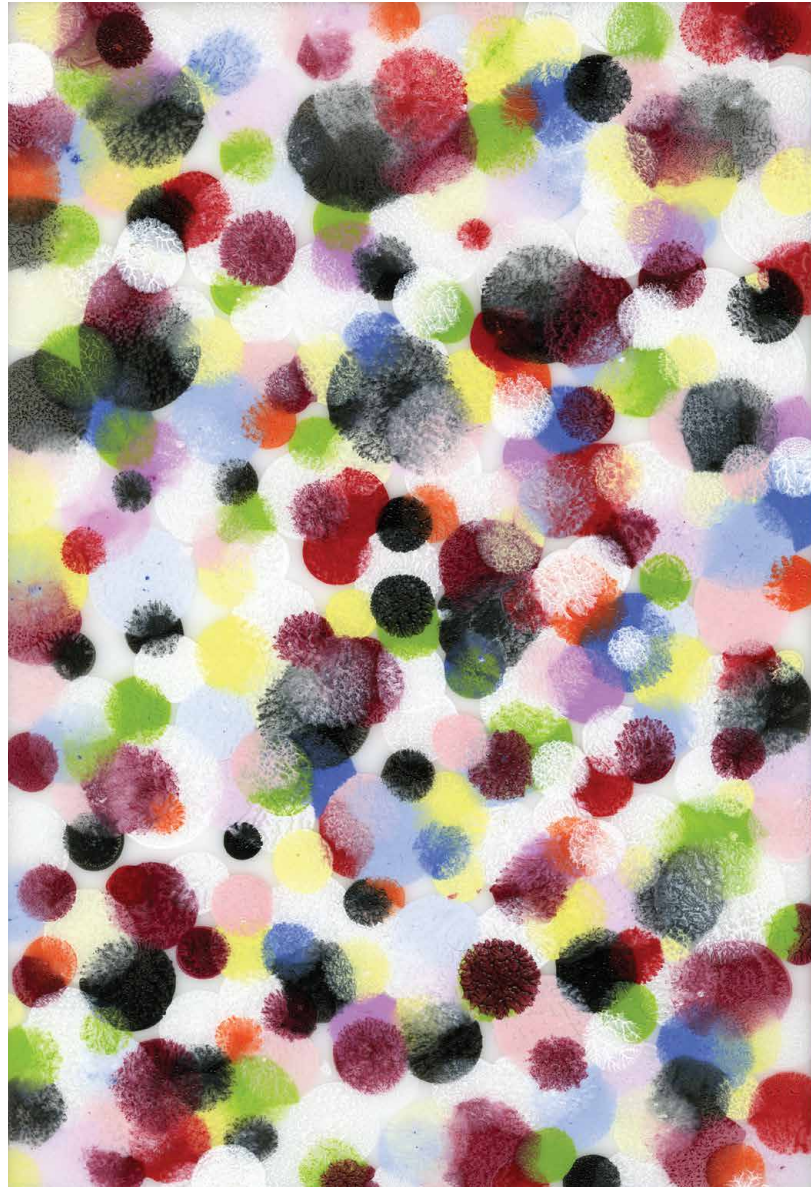


Figure 32, Anna White, *Geranium Painting*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 44 x 30 cm



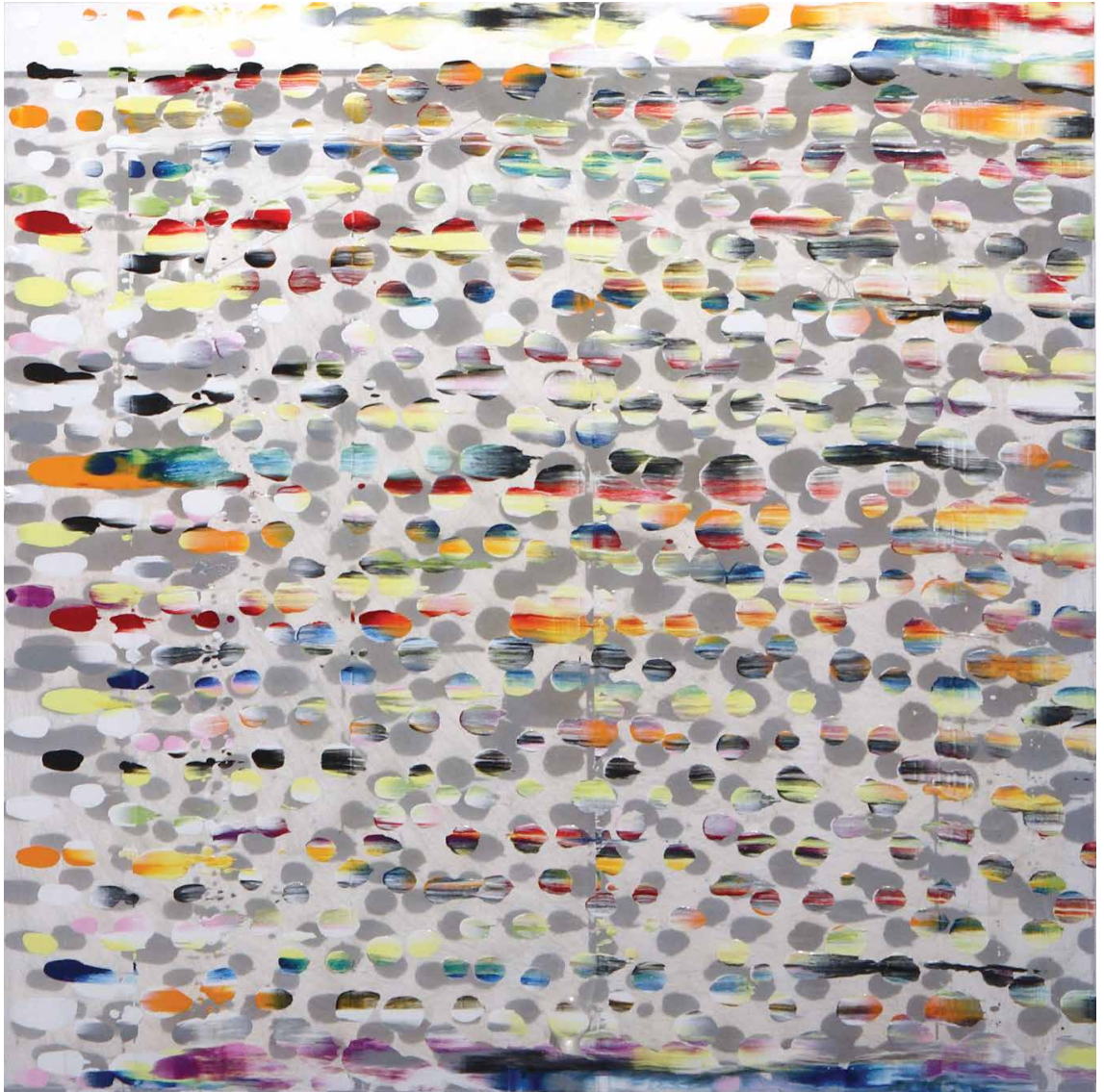


Figure 33, Anna White, *Impressionist Painting*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 45 x 45 cm



Figure 34, Anna White, *Sunset Painting*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 31 x 44 cm



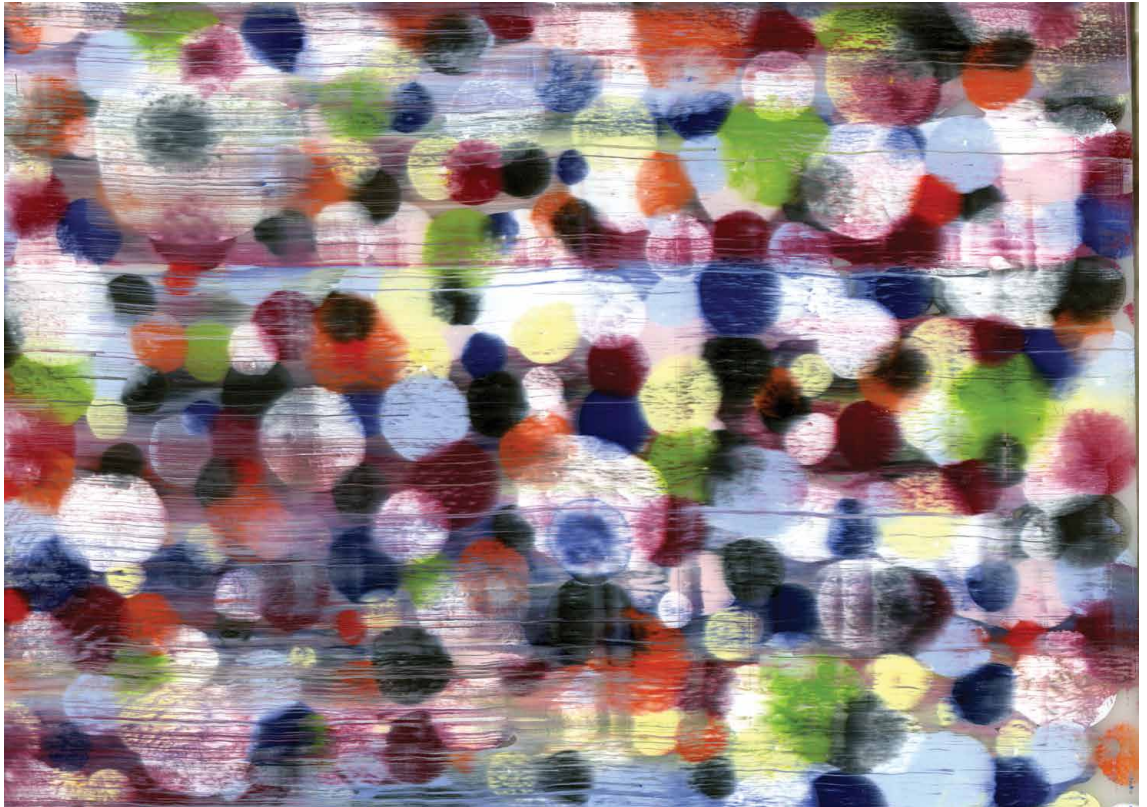


Figure 35, Anna White, *Night Painting*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 31 x 44 cm

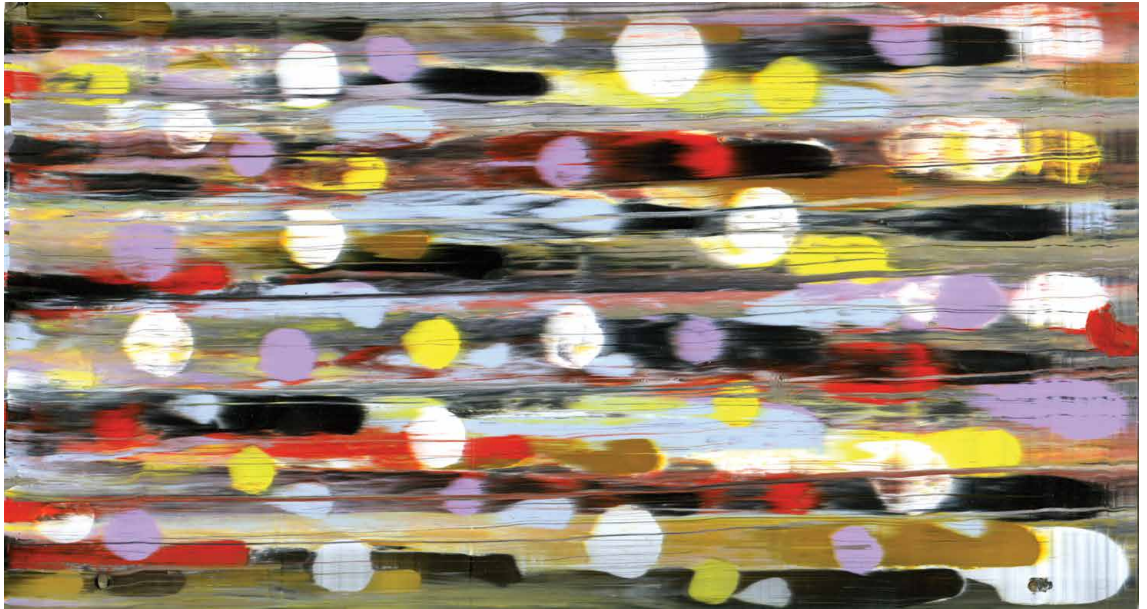


Figure 36, Anna White, *Small Dot Painting*, 2012,  
oil on perspex, 19 x 36 cm

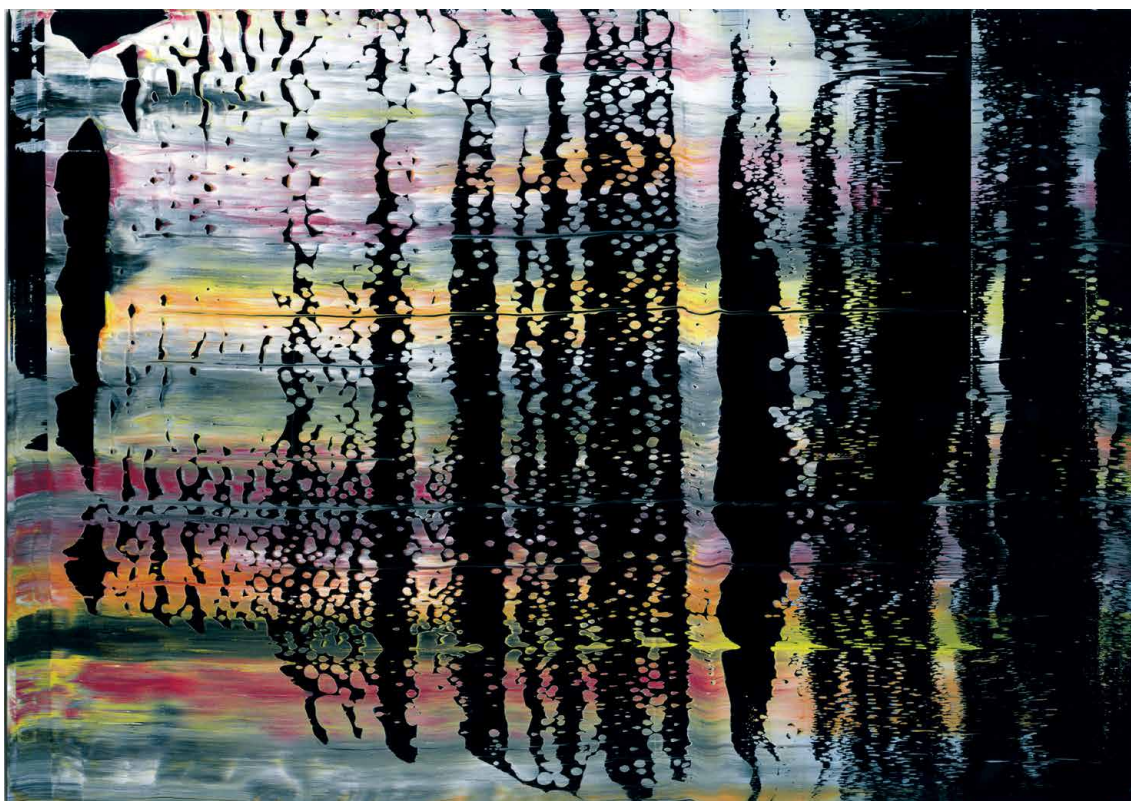


Figure 37, Anna White, *Away*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 25.5 x 36 cm



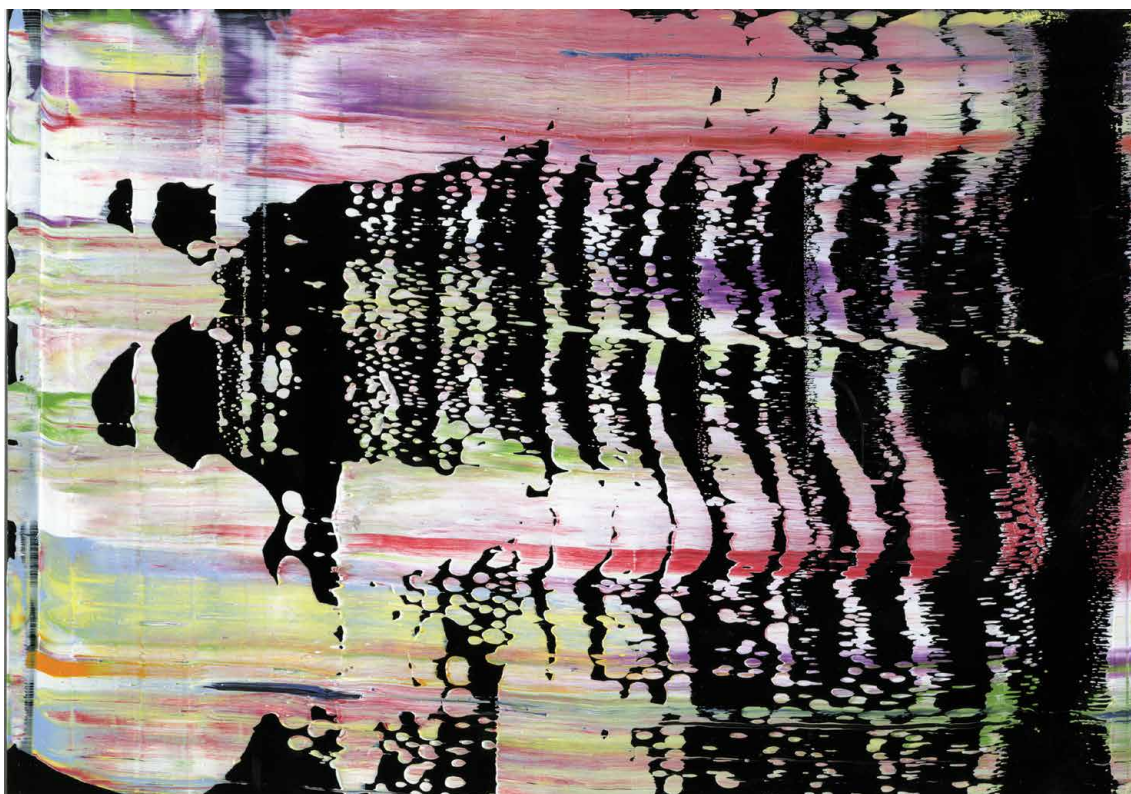


Figure 38, Anna White, *Towards*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 28 x 40 cm

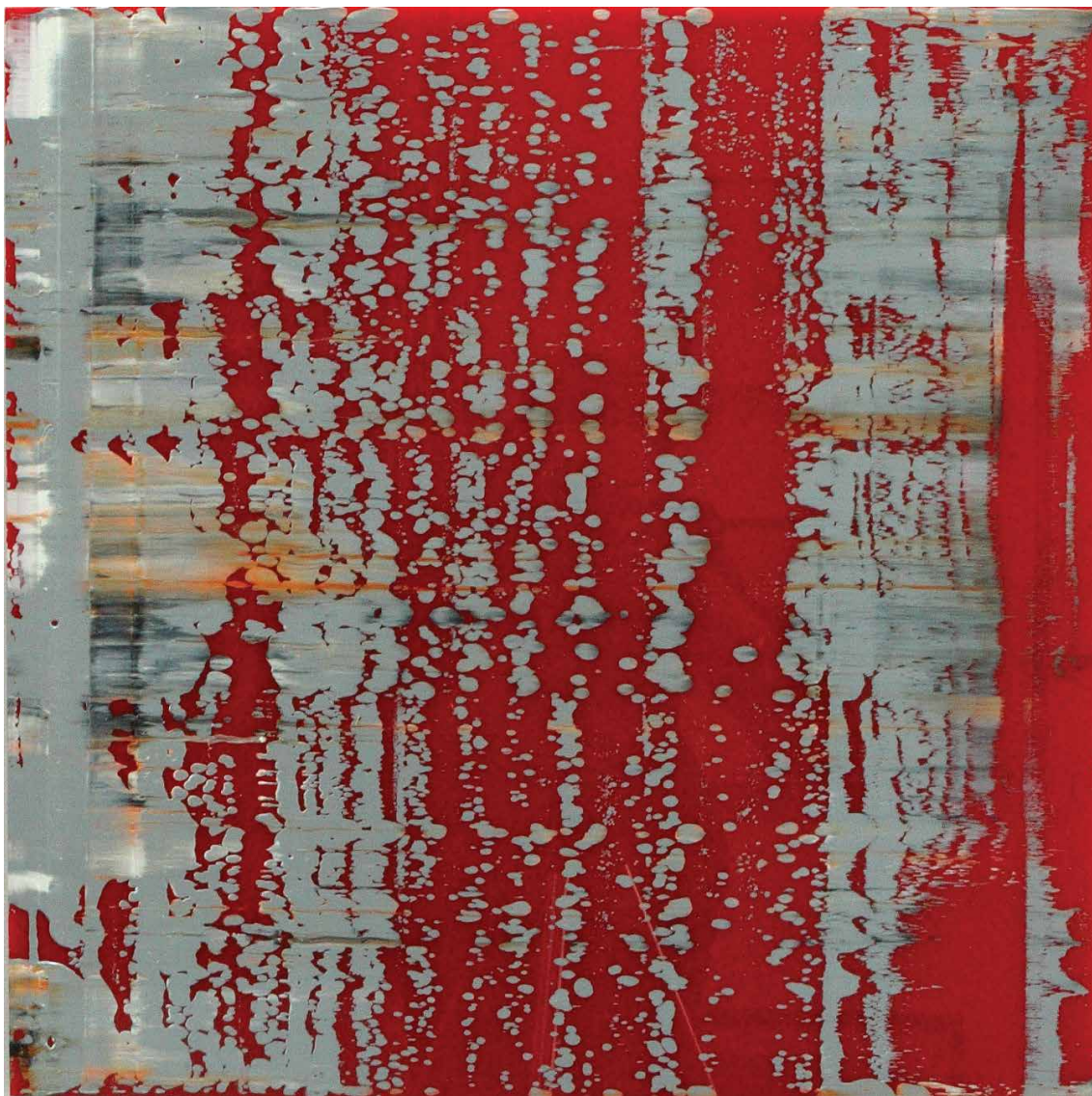


Figure 39, Anna White, *Grey on Red*, 2010,  
oil on Perspex, 54 x 54 cm



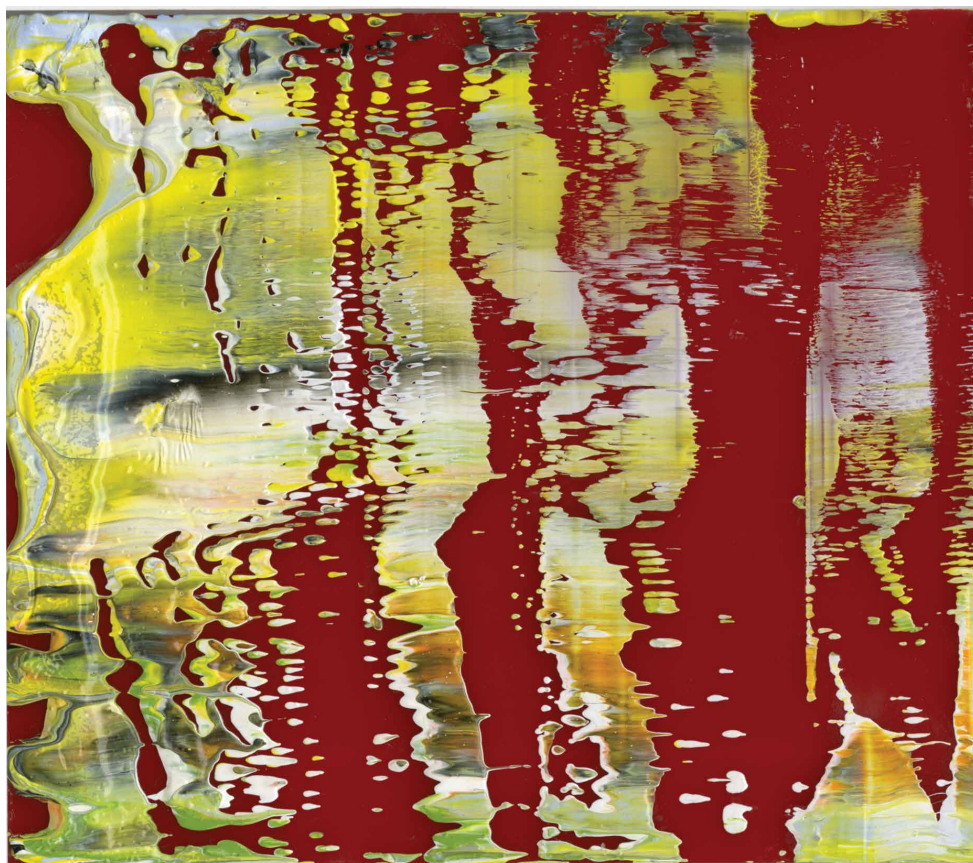


Figure 40, Anna White, *Red*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 14 x 16 cm





Figure 41, Anna White, *Two*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 26.3 x 78 cm,



**Figure 42,** Anna White, *Blue Gliding*, 2009,  
oil on perspex, 17 x 38 cm

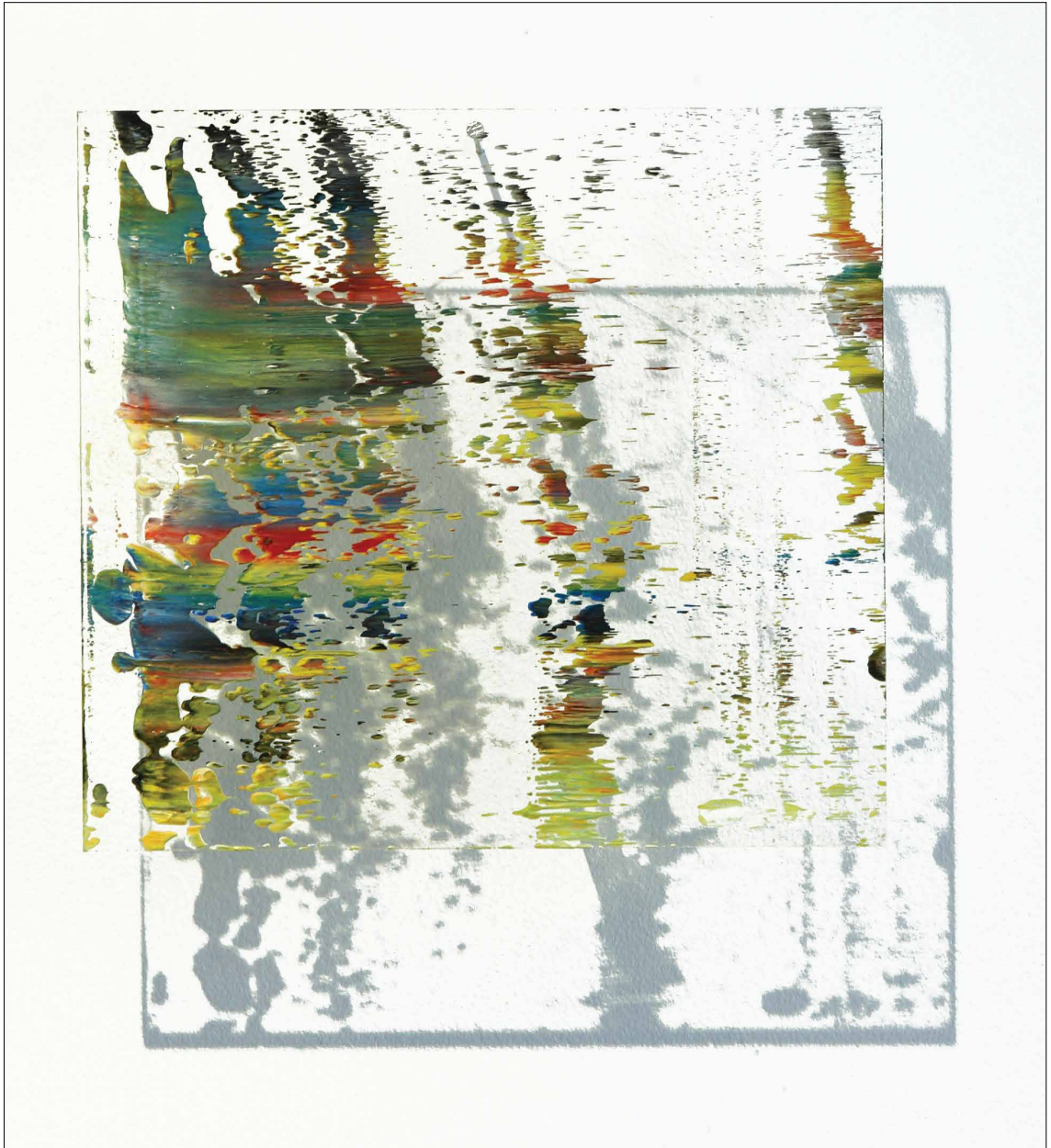


Figure 43, Anna White, *Venice*, 2010,  
oil on perspex, 24.5 x 22 cm





Figure 44, Anna White, *Untitled 1*, 2010,  
oil on paper, paper size, 42 x 31 cm

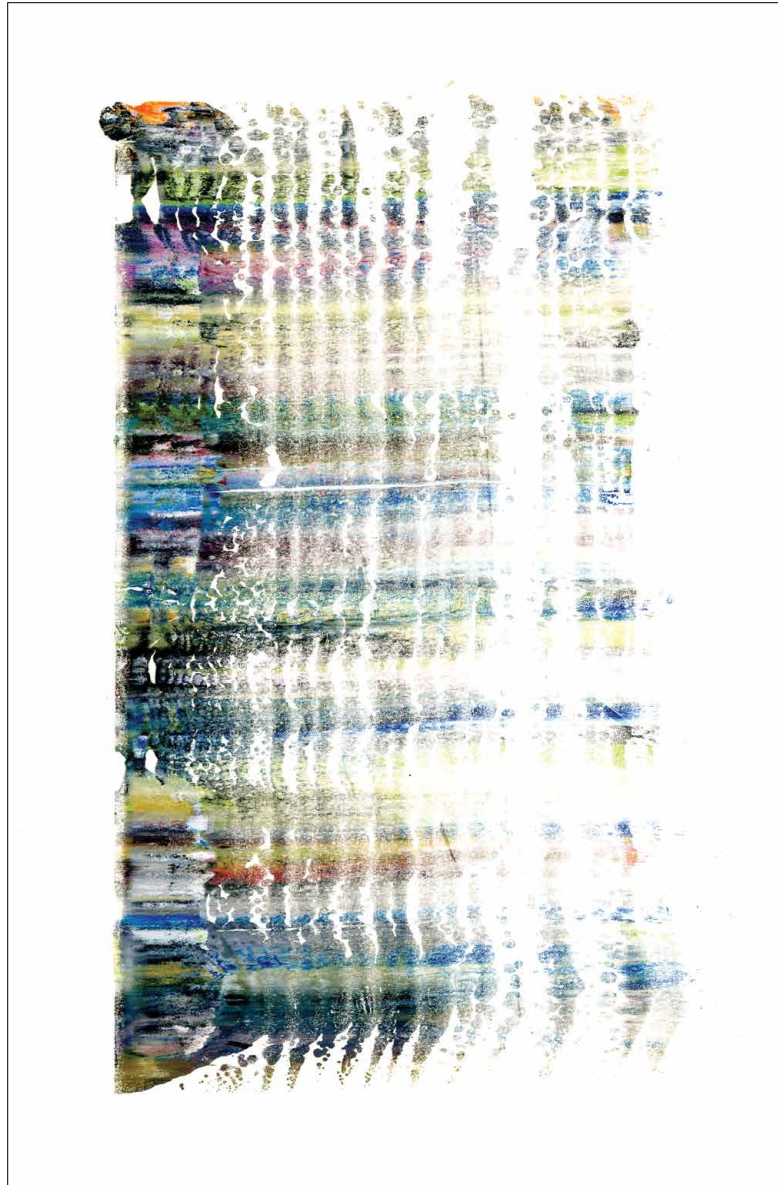


Figure 45, Anna White, *Untitled 2*, 2010,  
oil on paper, paper size, 56 x 36 cm

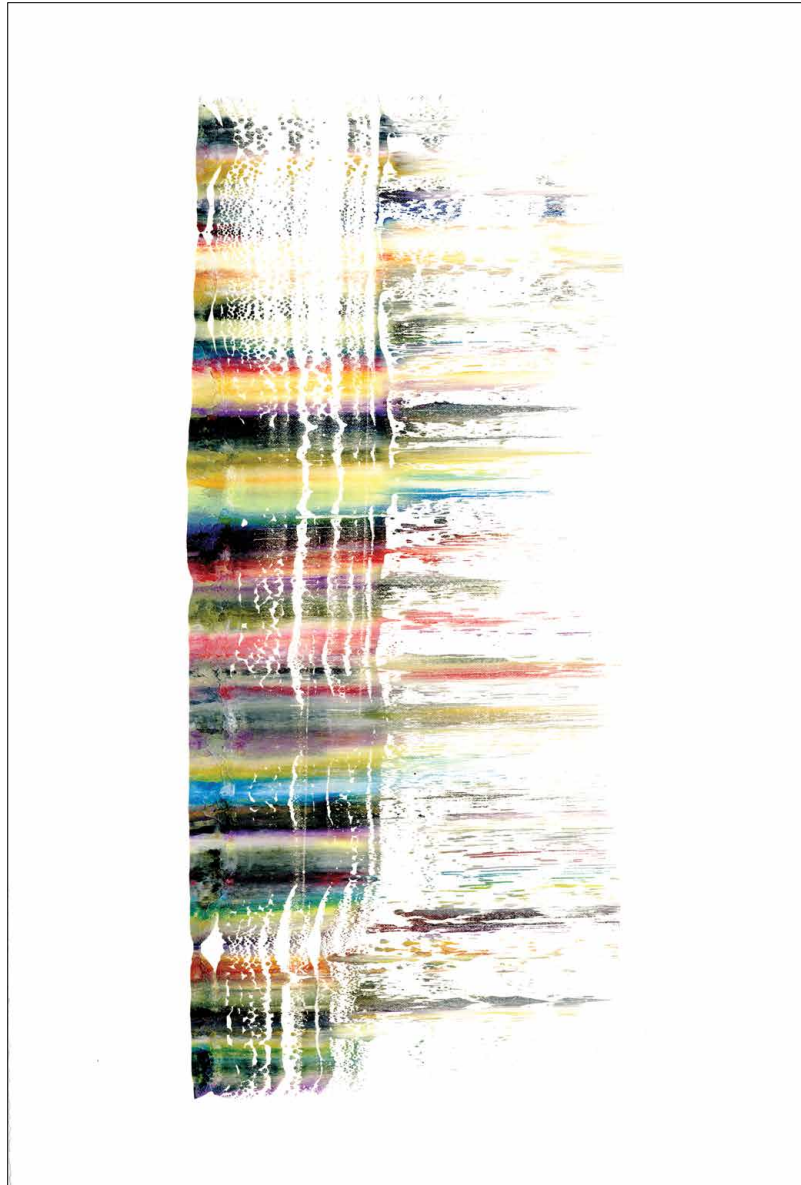


Figure 46, Anna White, *Untitled 3*, 2010,  
oil on paper, paper size, 54 x 36 cm



Figure 47, Anna White, *Untitled 4*, 2010,  
oil on paper, paper size, 38 x 40 cm



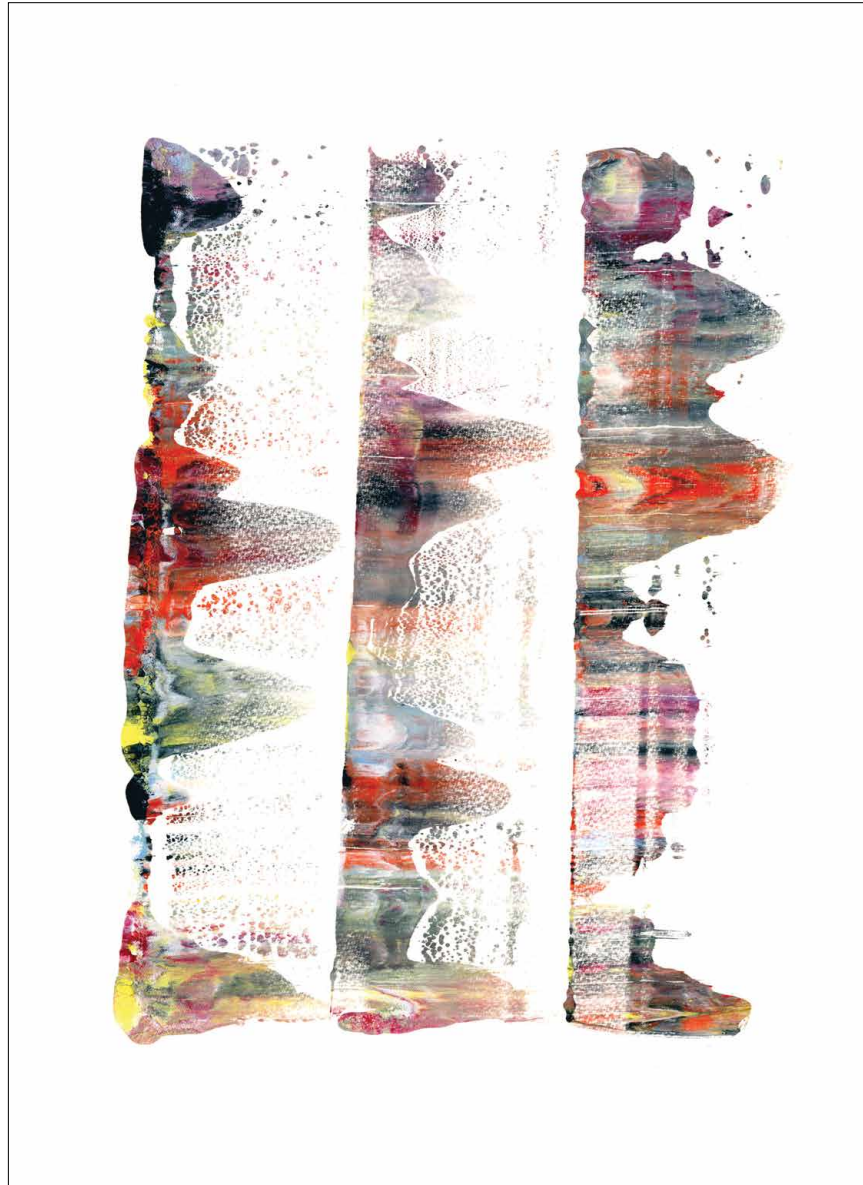


Figure 48, Anna White, *Untitled 5*, 2010,  
oil on paper, paper size, 50 x 36 cm



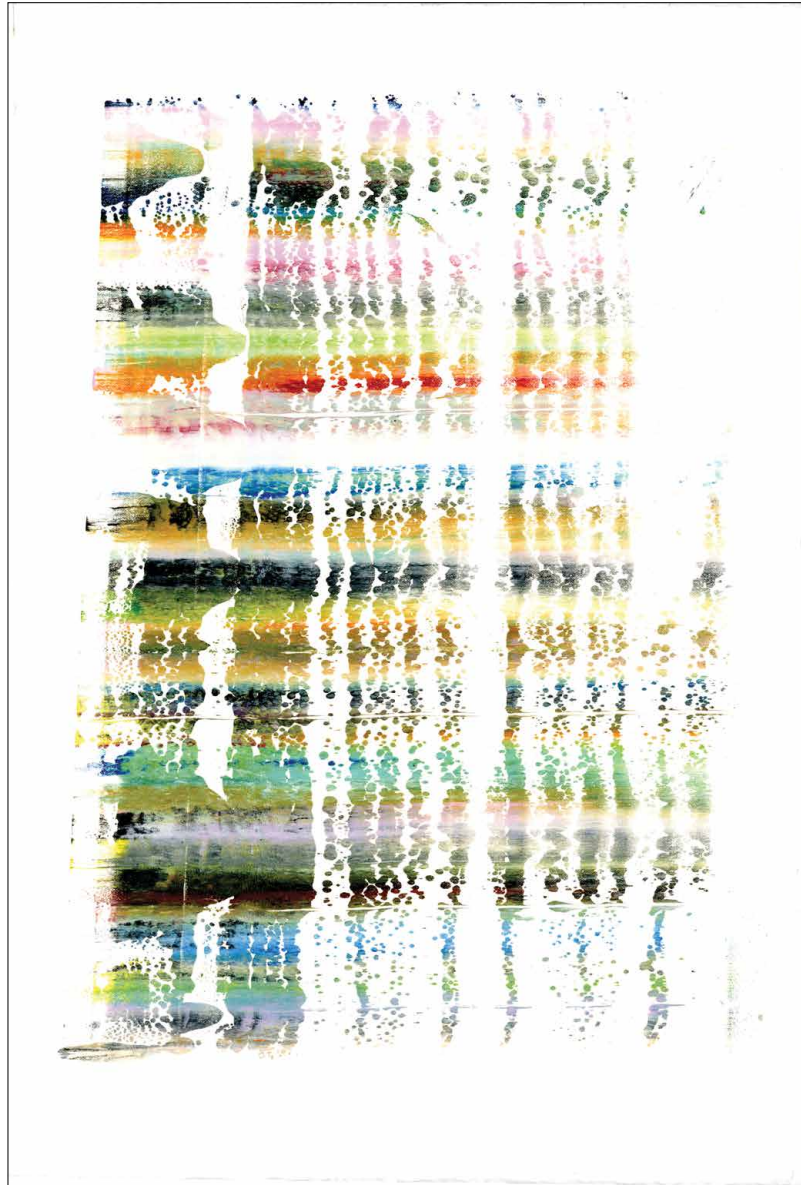


Figure 49, Anna White, *Untitled 6*, 2010,  
oil on paper, paper size, 57 x 38 cm

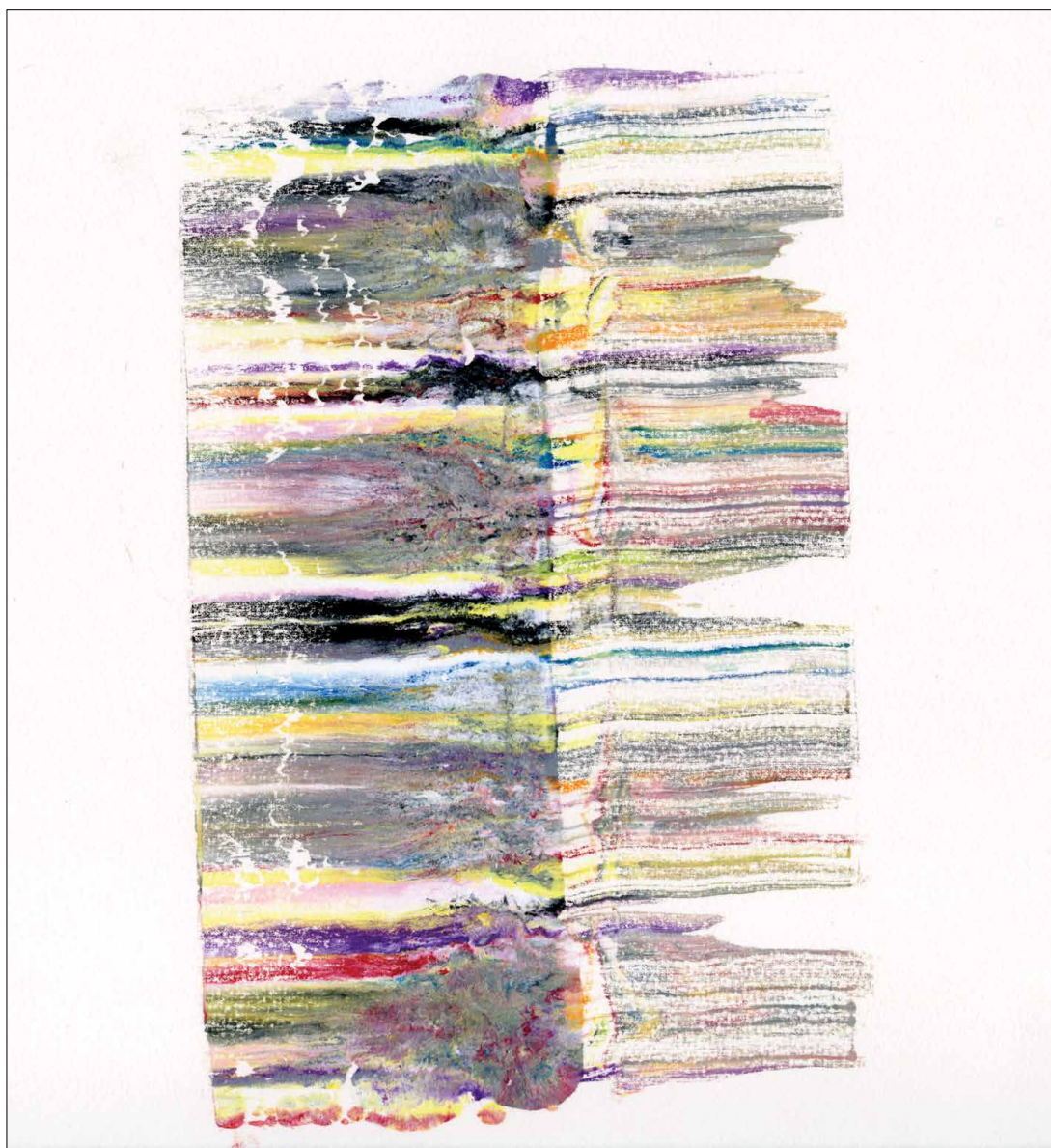


Figure 50, Anna White, *Untitled 7*, 2010,  
oil on paper, paper size, 27 x 25 cm

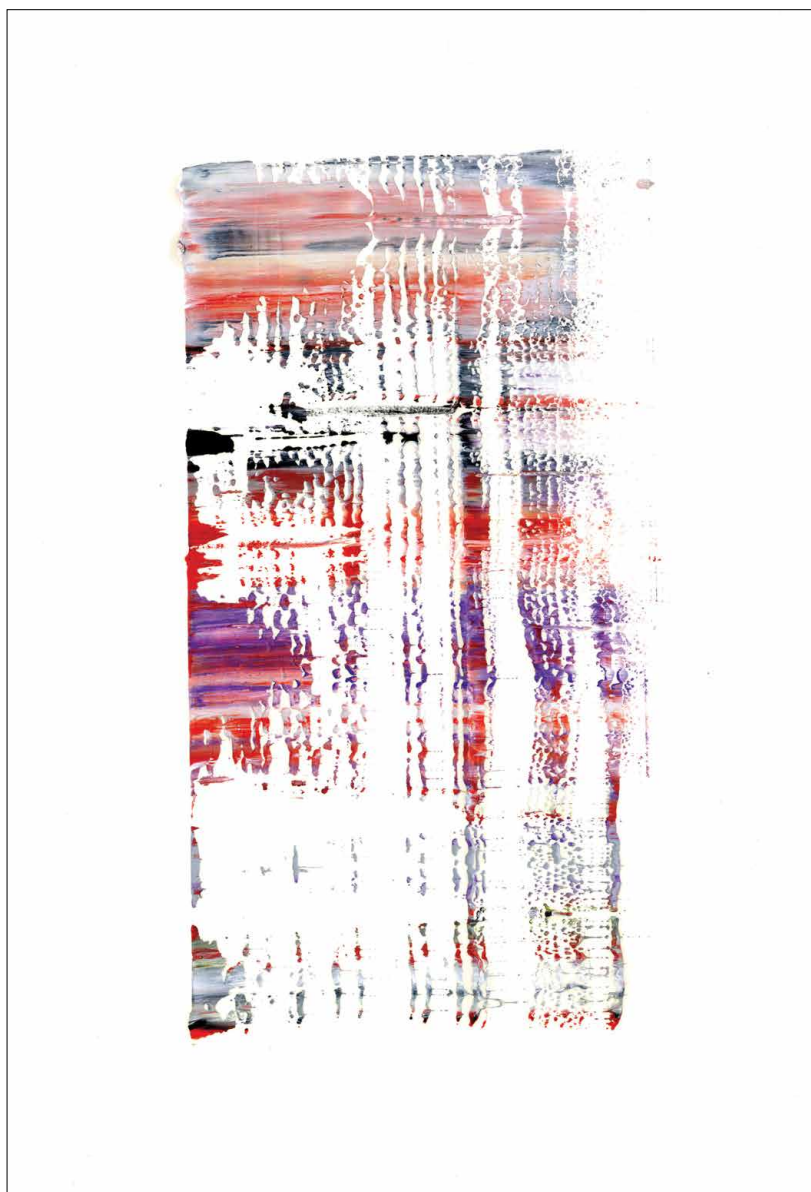


Figure 51, Anna White, *Untitled 8*, 2010,  
oil on paper, paper size, 51 x 35 cm





Figure 52, Anna White, *Green Guide*, 2010,  
oil on paper

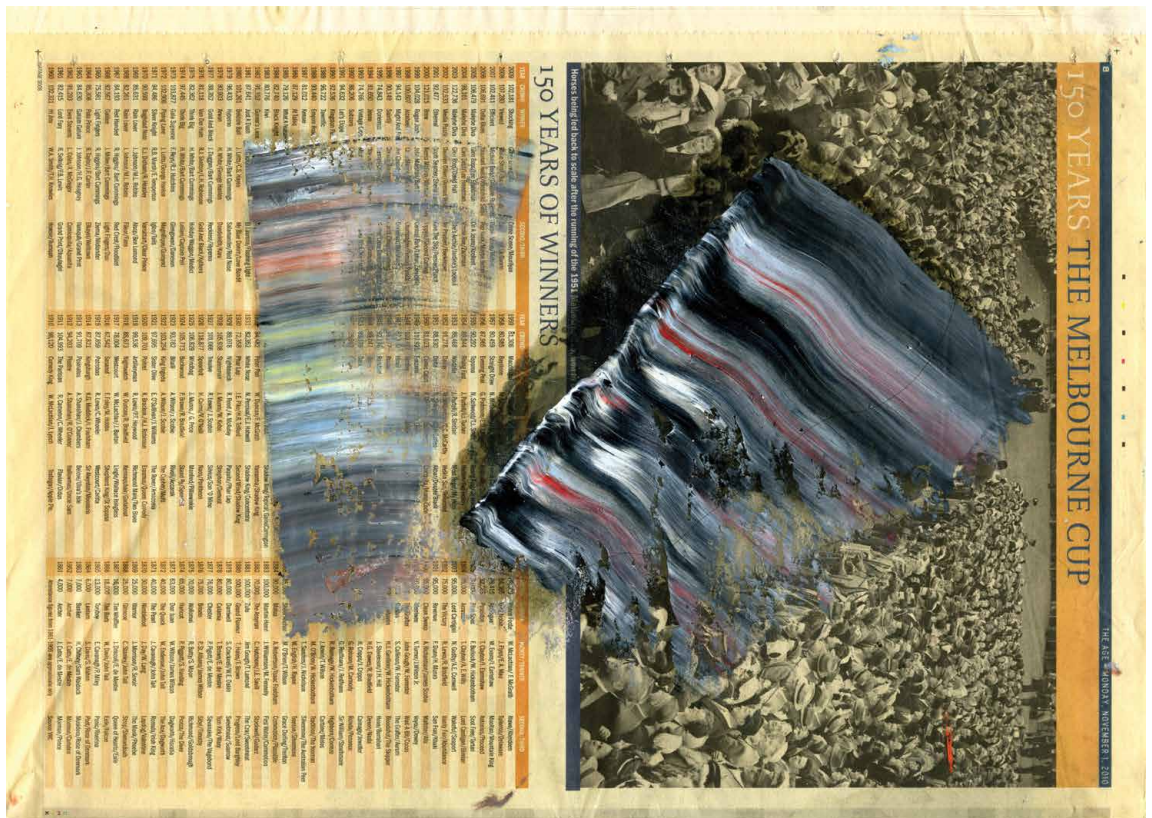


Figure 53, Anna White, *Melbourne Cup*, 2010,  
oil on paper







Figure 55, Anna White, *Scarlet, Black, Yellow, Blue*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 16.5 x 30.5 cm



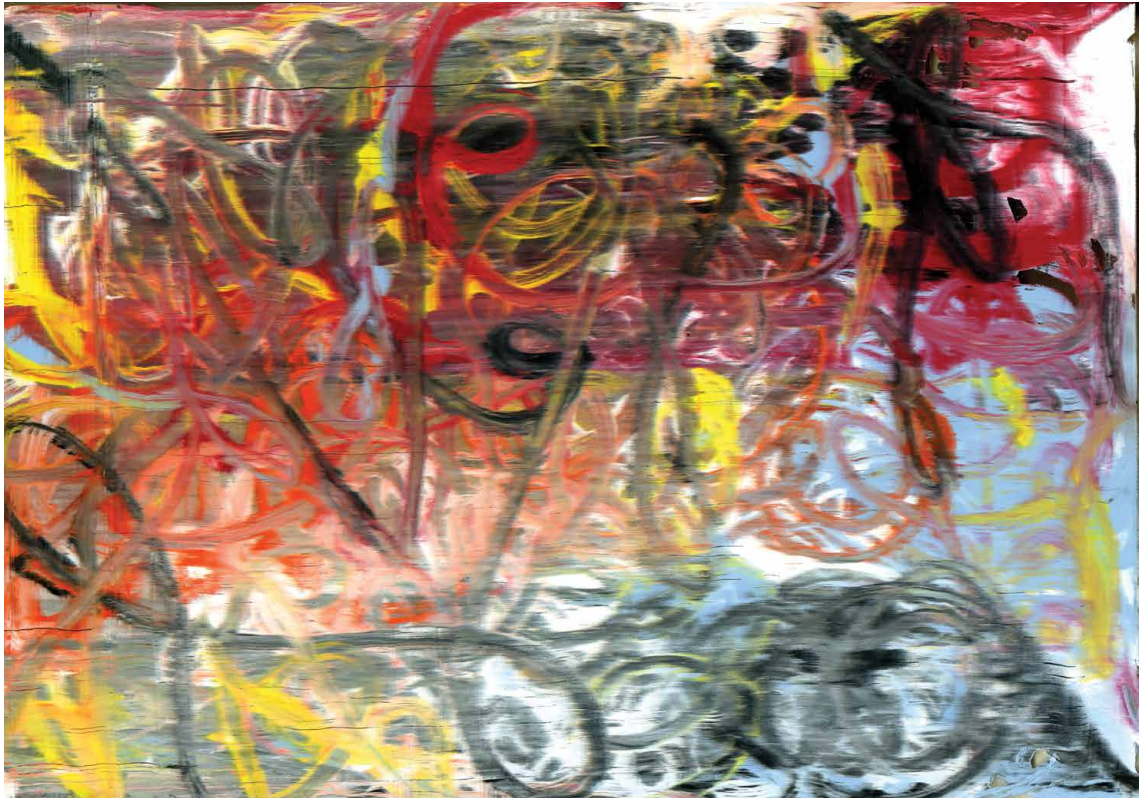


Figure 56, Anna White, *Graffiti Painting*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 31 x 44 cm



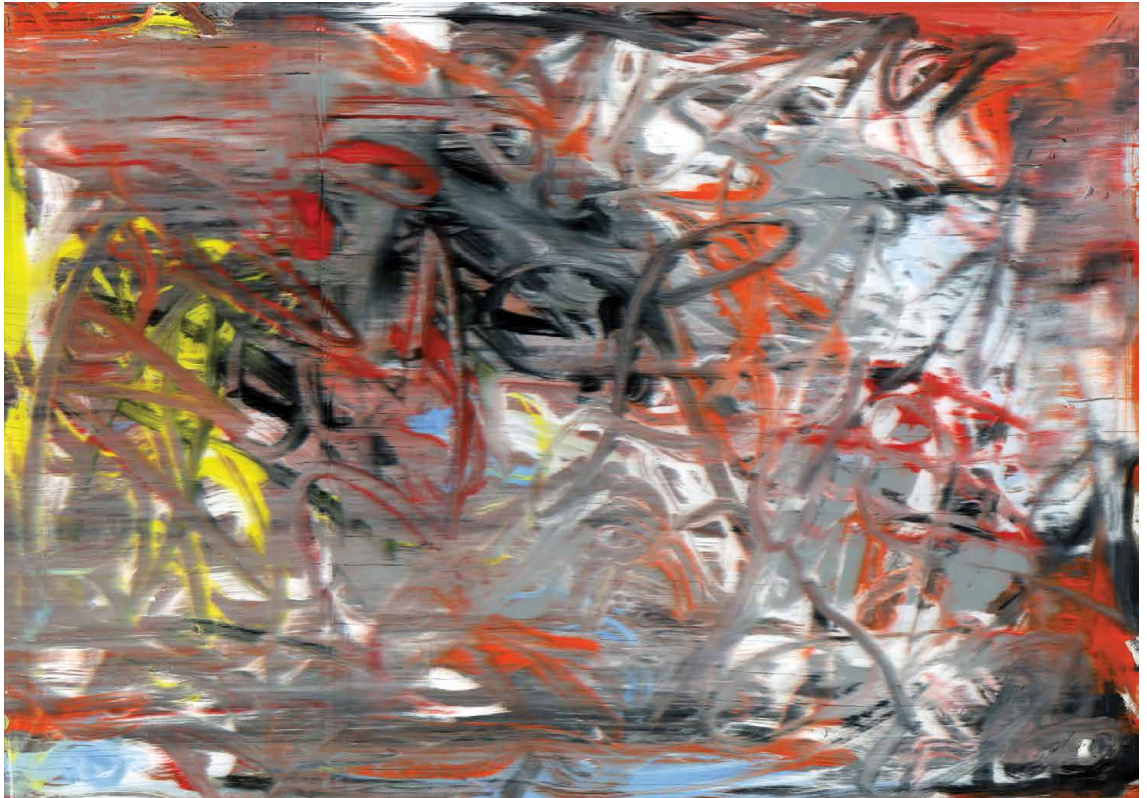


Figure 57, Anna White, *Yellow, Grey, Red*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 2011, 46 x 56 cm



Figure 58, Anna White, *Yellow, Grey, Orange, Black, Red, Blue*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 46 x 56 cm



Figure 59, Anna White, *Grey Yellow Blue Black*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 21 x70 cm





Figure 60, Anna White, *Long Yellow*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 21 x 67.5 cm

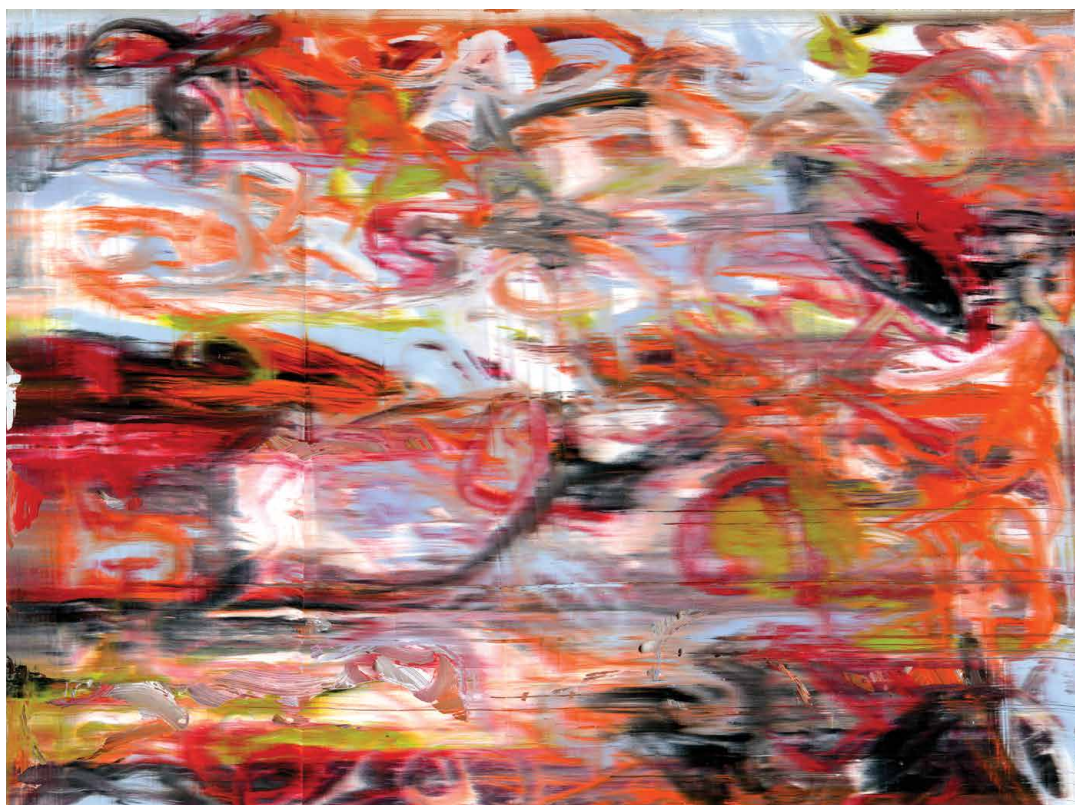


Figure 61, Anna White, *Scarlet Scarlet*, 2011,  
oil on perspex 32 x 41.5 cm



Figure 62, Anna White, *Bullock*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 18 x 48 cm





**Figure 63**, Anna White, *Angular*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 21.5 x 58.5 cm

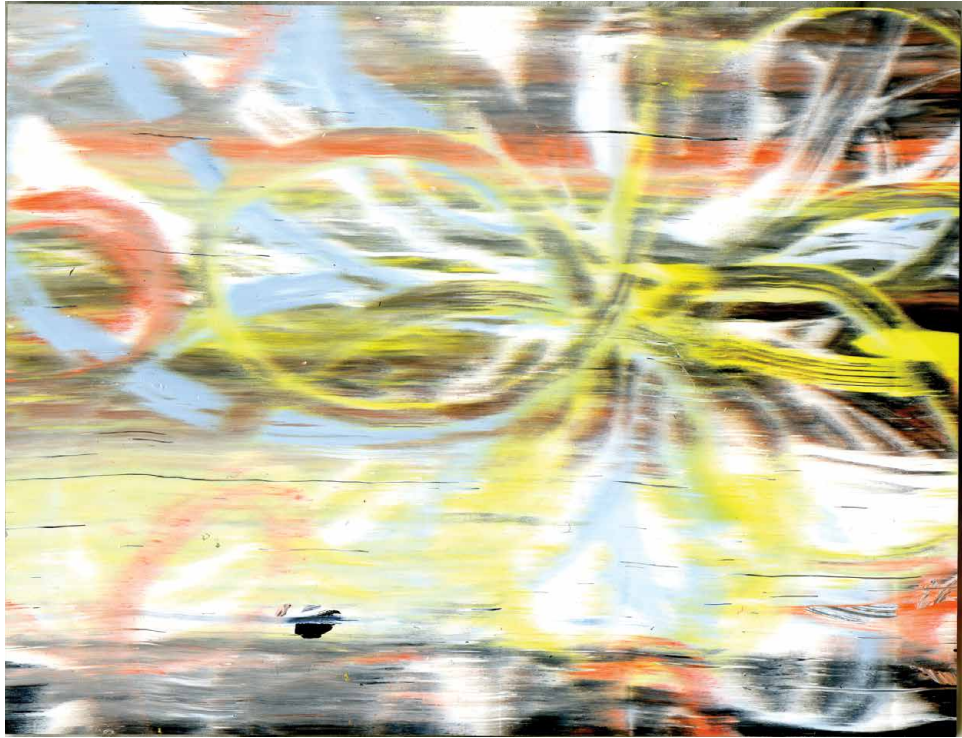


Figure 64, Anna White, *Flower Painting*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 14 x 18.5 cm



Figure 65, Anna White, *Flower*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 41.5 x 55 cm

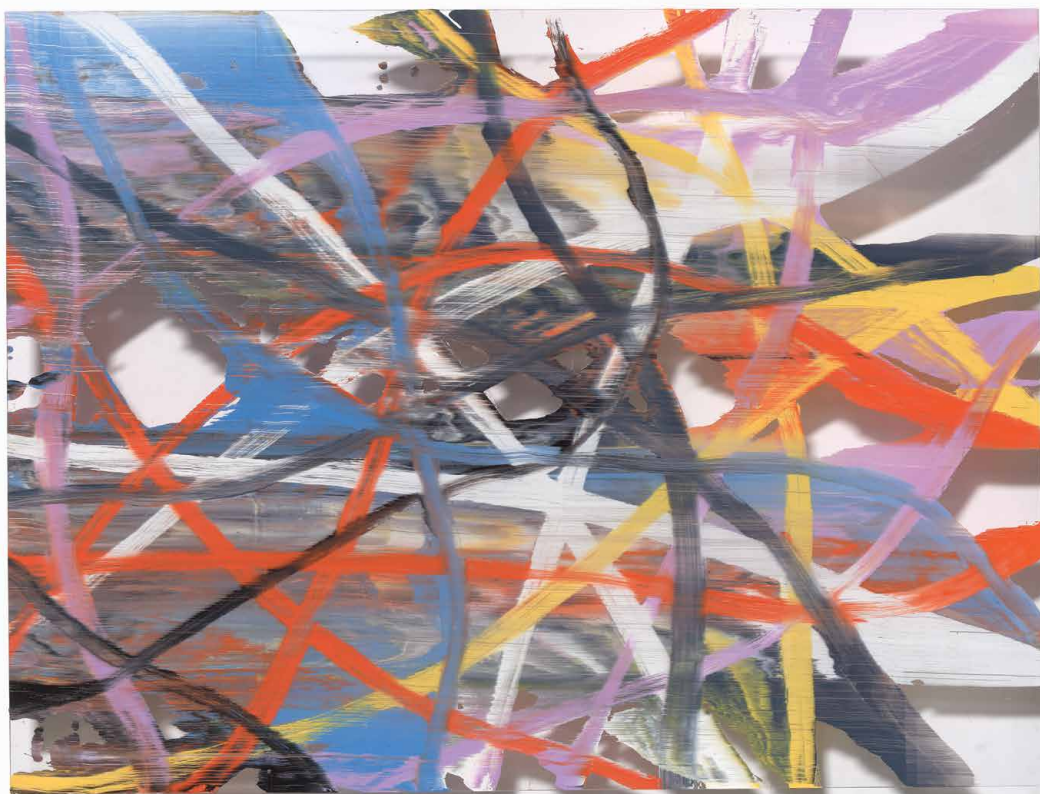


Figure 66, Anna White, *Motility*, 2011,  
oil on perspex, 41.5 x 55 cm





Figure 67, Anna White, *Folding*, 2012,  
oil on perspex, 41.5 x 55 cm



Figure 68, Anna White, *Red/Yellow*, 2011,  
oil on perspex. 39 x 44.5 cm



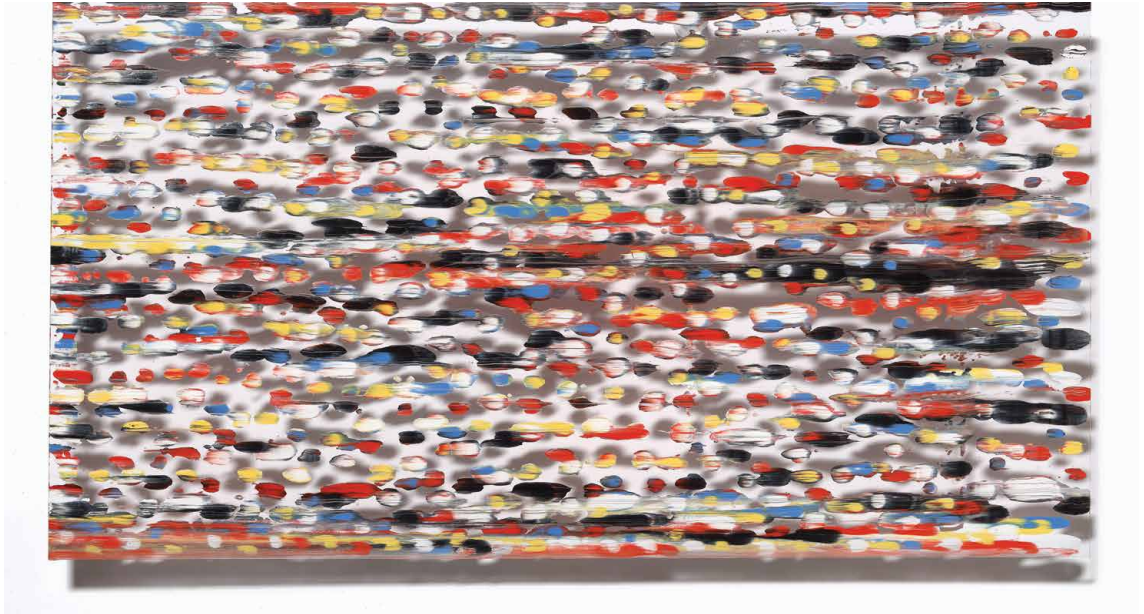


Figure 69, Anna White, *Dots*, 2011,  
oil on perspex. 32.5 x 80.5 cm

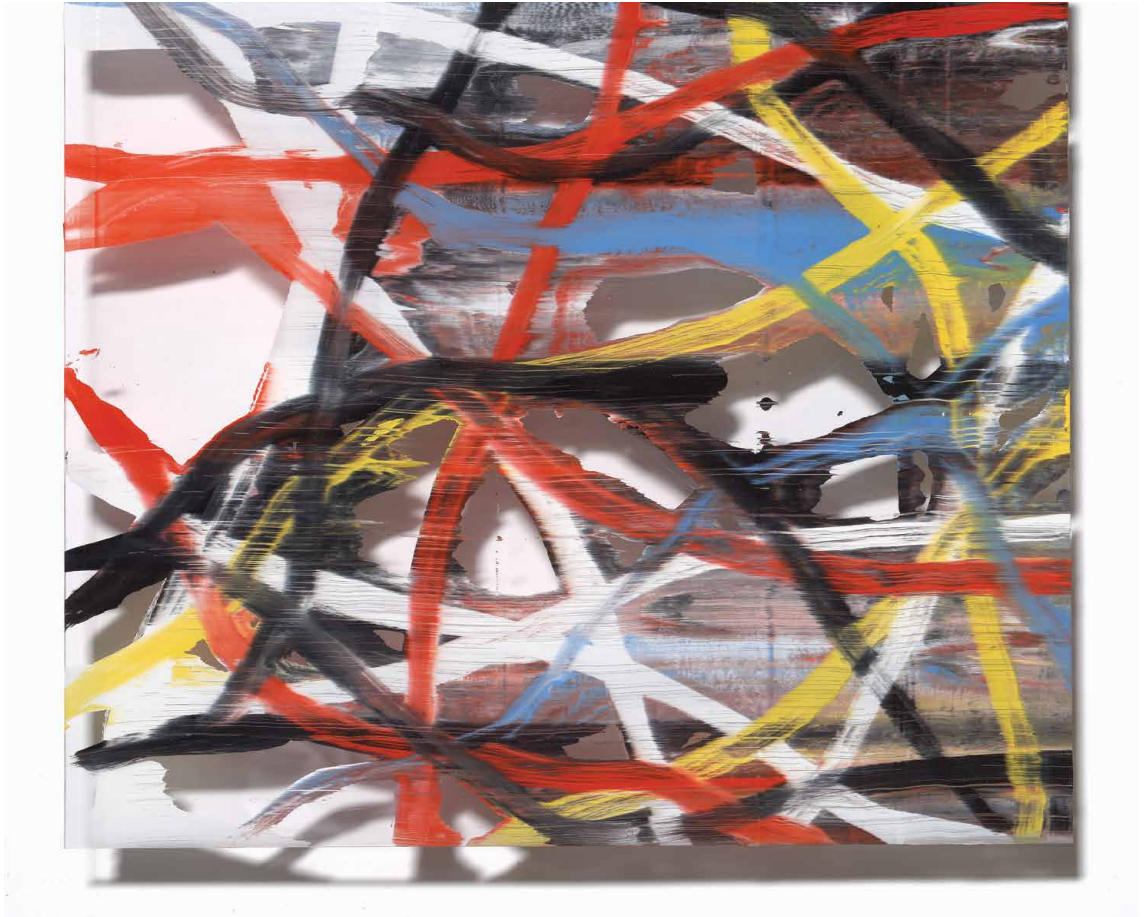


Figure 70, Anna White, *Migration*, 2011,  
oil on perspex. 39 x 44.5 cm



Figure 71, Anna White, *Circular*, 2011,  
oil on perspex. 32.5 x 80.5 cm



Figure 72, Anna White, *Three in one*, 2013,  
oil on perspex, 17.5 x 53 cm



Figure 73, Anna White, *Green Geo*, 2013,  
15.5 x 36 cm





Figure 74, Anna White, *Dial*, 2013,  
oil on perspex, 13.5 x 37.5 cm





Figure 75, Anna White, *RYB*, 2012,  
oil on perspex, 17.7 x 53.5 cm



**Figure 76,** Anna White, *RYB 2*, 2012,  
oil on perspex, 17.7 x 53.5 cm



Figure 77, Anna White, *SYBG*, 2013,  
oil on perspex, 17.7 x 53.5 cm

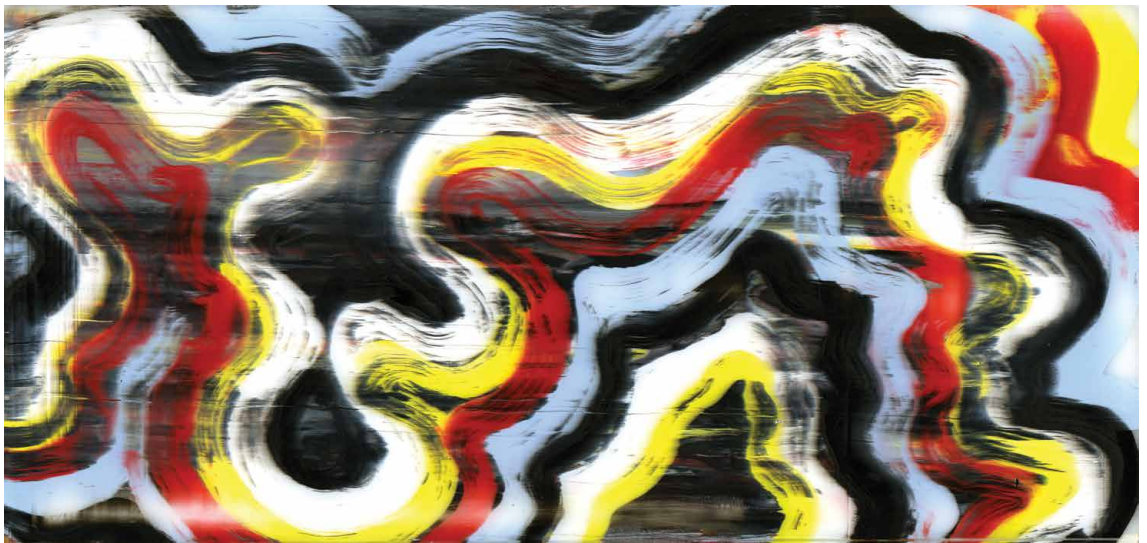


Figure 78, Anna White, *Chinese Whispers*, 2013,  
17.7 x 36 cm



Figure 79, Anna White, *Rhythmanalysis 3*, 2013,  
17.7 x 36 cm





Figure 80, Anna White, *Rhythmanalysis 4*, 2013,  
oil on perspex, 17.7 x 38 cm





Figure 81, Anna White, *Rhythmanalysis 5*, 2013,  
oil on perspex, 17.7 x 38 cm



Figure 82, Anna White, *Rhythmanalysis 6*, 2013,  
oil on perspex, 17.7 x 38 cm



Figure 83, Anna White, *Rhythmanalysis 7*, 2013,  
oil on perspex, 17.7 x 38 cm



Figure 84, Anna White, *Rhythmanalysis 8*, 2013,  
oil on perspex, 17.7 x 38 cm



Figure 85, Anna White, *Installation view. Away ... Towards*,  
Place Gallery, 2010



**Figure 86,** Anna White, *Installation view. Away ... Towards*,  
Place Gallery, 2010



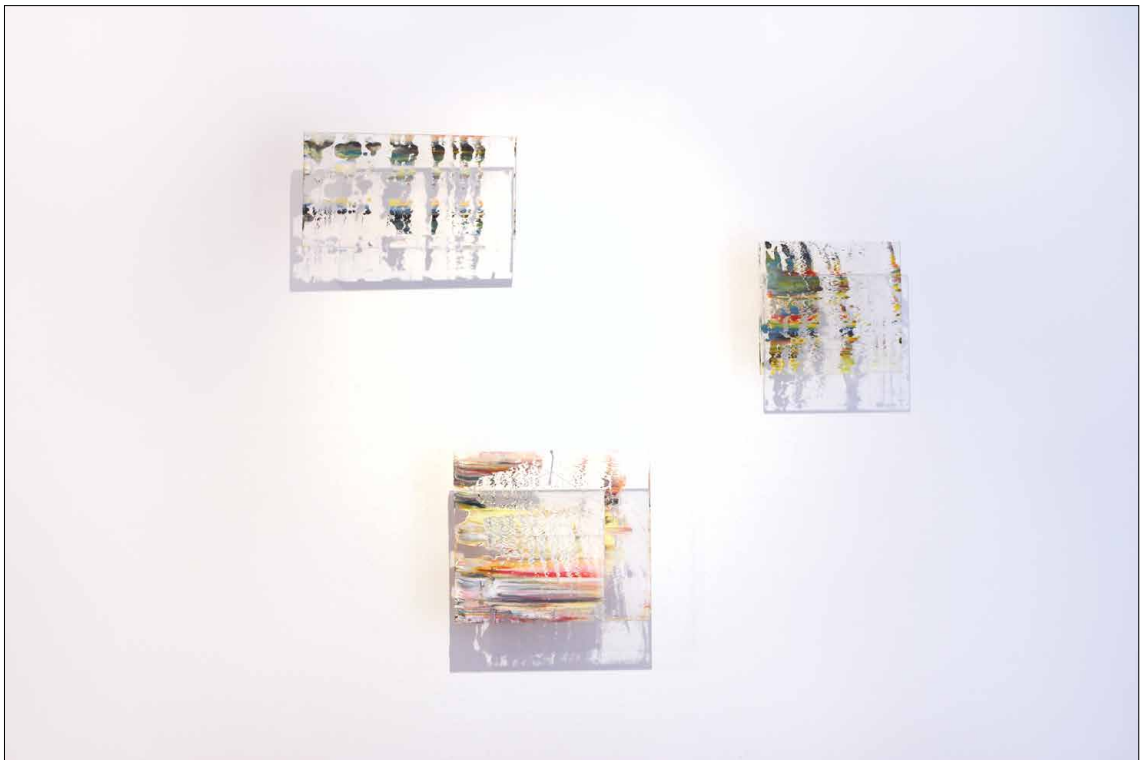


Figure 87, Anna White, *Installation view. Away ... Towards*,  
Place Gallery, 2010



Figure 88, Anna White, *Installation view. Away ... Towards*,  
Place Gallery, 2010



**Figure 89,** Anna White, *Installation view, Monash University, Colloquium 2013*



Figure 90, Anna White, *Installation view, Monash University, Colloquium 2013*



Figure 91, Anna White, *Installation view, Monash University, Colloquium 2013*



**Figure 92,** Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015,  
photography, Matthew Stanton





Figure 93, Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015, photography, Matthew Stanton



**Figure 94,** Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015,  
photography, Matthew Stanton



**Figure 95,** Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015,  
photography, Matthew Stanton



**Figure 96,** Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015,  
photography, Matthew Stanton

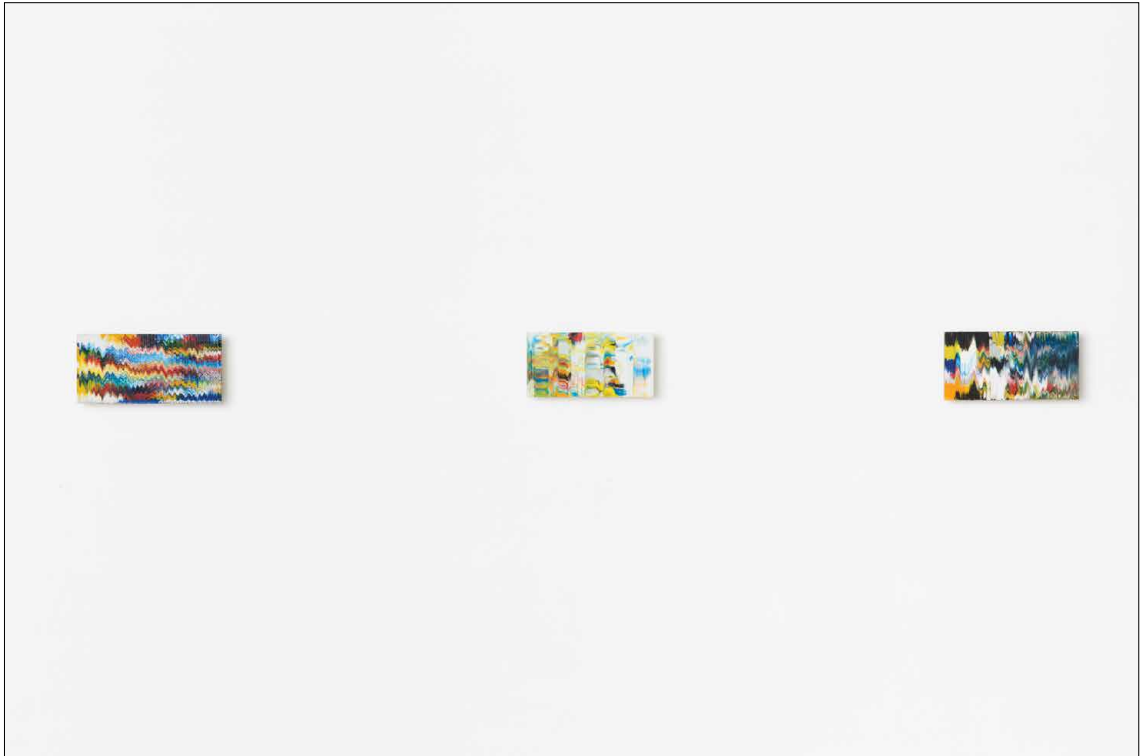


**Figure 97**, Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015,  
photography, Matthew Stanton

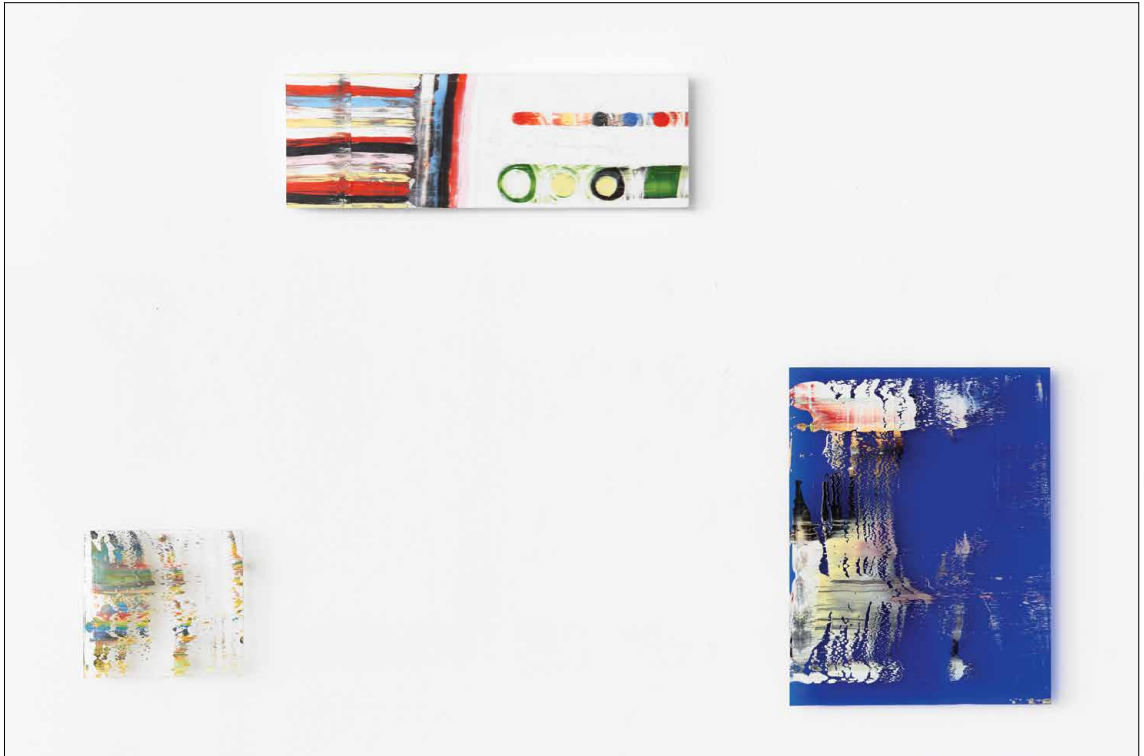


**Figure 98,** Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015,  
photography, Matthew Stanton

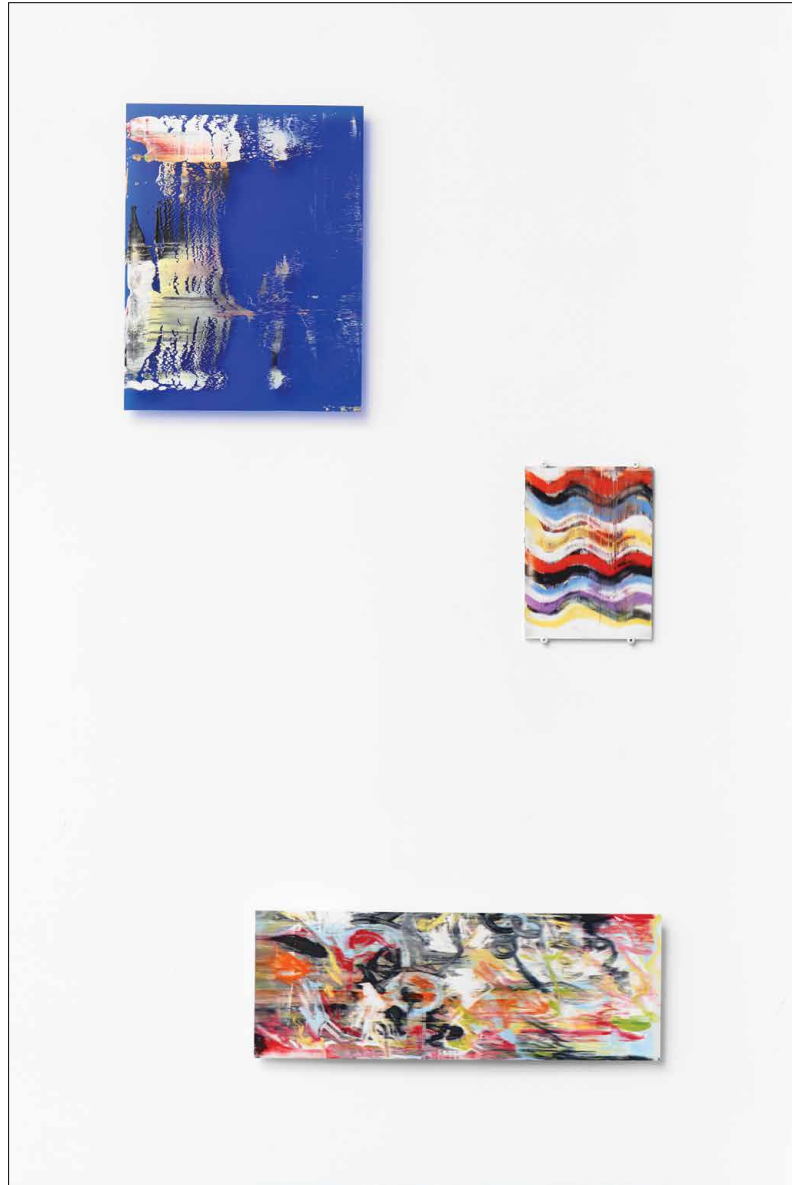




**Figure 99**, Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015,  
photography, Matthew Stanton



**Figure 100,** Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015,  
photography, Matthew Stanton



**Figure 101,** Anna White, *Installation view*, PhD exhibition, MADA Faculty Gallery, 2015, photography, Matthew Stanton

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